

Le Roman de la Couronne

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by [ResidentHesitant](#)

Summary

Courtly romance: A European medieval literary genre that emphasizes nobility and chivalry. Oftentimes, courtly romances are extramarital, as love was not a major consideration in noble marriages. Courtly romances, in turn, emphasize love over status or power.

Or: He was a knight. She was his king. Could I make it any more obvious?

During negotiations before the Final Control Room, Eret agreed to marry Dream in order to legitimize their position as king once the title was passed over. Arranged marriages are not unheard of, especially in solidifying power; some couples even fall in love. Almost two years later, they are... regretting it, to put it lightly. After a blowup fight on the eve of the Manberg-Pogtopia War, Dream assigns Punz, his most loyal knight, to be Eret's personal bodyguard. Political negotiations, deeds of valor, meetings in walled gardens, and endless adventure to avoid detection ensue.

Notes

welcome back to "res has extremely specific brainworms:" rarepair edition. that's right sucker this isnt just a rarepair this is THREE rarepairs AND one of my special interests. guy who loves medieval literature voice i could do medieval literature with this. all referenced works will be in the end note of each chapter

c not cc as always.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

"The art of courtly love was practiced in English courts from the 1300's to the 1500's. During this period of time marriages were arranged and had little to do with love. A successful marriage was perceived as one that brought material advantages to the participants and their families."

- The Origins of Courtly Love, Middle Ages Source

In which Eret aids the rebellion, performs the role of a loving spouse, and has regrets, among other things.

Chapter Notes

ohhhh boy here we go. ive been really excited about this fic so i hope you all enjoy <3

one thing i will point out before this begins is that names play a very big role in this fic. also, if the characters are speaking like they are in a play, there is a Reason.

warnings for: unhealthy/toxic eret/dream relationship, events of manberg-pogtopia war, referenced suicide, references to infidelity, implied abusive relationships, dissociation, threats of violence, mild alcohol, grief, and love-bombing.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The thing about fairy tales is that they never tell you what happens after the princess marries her one true love.

The wedding happens, and that's it.

They never go into detail about the aftermath, about the children then sired or the rigorous training the hapless Cinderella must undergo to be considered *real* royalty or the way Rapunzel longs for her tower in her lowest moments, even though she can never go back. Maybe Snow White misses the seven dwarves. Maybe Sleeping Beauty misses her eternal sleep. Maybe the Little Mermaid misses her home and her family and everything she left behind to marry her prince and live on the land.

At least Morgan gets to become Merlin's apprentice. At least Guinevere gets to be burned at the stake when her crimes are discovered.

Eret's been fashioning himself quite like Morgan and Guinevere these days. Helpless regent, traitorous bitch, sorceress and fae-born, contested in power and questioned at every step only to be shot down upon suggestion.

The marriage had seemed like a good idea a year ago.

It doesn't matter. It's happened. And there isn't much Eret can do about it now, save for killing their husband and making it look like an accident. These days, even as he slips through Pogtopia's hidden door, he feels like Rapunzel, trapped in that tower. Let down your hair, fair king. Your watchful custodian is nowhere to be seen.

Wilbur and Tommy were banished from Manberg in January. Eret's been bringing them supplies since March. It's the tail-end of May now, and Eret is doing everything in her power to keep her damn identity hidden as she sneaks into the ravine. Dream's forbidden him from helping the rebellion with both words and actions, fucking hypocrite. The SMP is supposed to neutral, his ass; he knows damn well Dream's been dealing explosives to the rebels behind his back. They don't think Wilbur would take too kindly to their presence, either, even if they *are* helping – Calchas and Criseyde in one.

The betrayal was a year ago, too, give or take a few days. The wound still feels fresh. Eret can only hope to be burned at the stake one day.

She leaves the ravine the same way she entered, silent, her pack now twelve potions lighter and the night marginally cooler. It's past midnight. The moon is high and waning. He needs to get home before anyone realizes he's gone.

The castle is quiet when Eret returns. Too quiet, in that all too stereotypical way. Every footfall echoes as he ascends the stairs to his quarters, and his silent prayers that his husband not catch him returning feel too loud in his own head.

The parlor lights shine from under the door when Eret approaches. She bites back her apprehension and, against her better judgement, opens it anyway.

"Hello," Dream says, sitting in the armchair like he's been posing for a while.

"Hello." Eret doesn't look at him as they close the door. The fire crackles behind them. When they turn back, Dream is sitting up straight, leaning forward.

"You were out late. Can't imagine why."

"Had to clear my head."

"But you look so... so *troubled*." He stands, crossing the parlor towards them. They don't cringe, they're not at *that* point in the relationship, but they do sidestep him as he approaches. No use being cornered at the door. Much easier to be cornered within their entire quarters.

"What has you down, your majesty?"

"No need to call me that outside of the court," Eret dismisses, rolling their eyes. She knows he means it as an insult. They haven't slept in the same bed in months. "I'm fine. You should

go to bed.”

“How can I rest knowing that my dear, *darling* spouse, the *monarch* of my kingdom, was out gallivanting in the middle of the night? What if you'd been set upon by bandits? What if you'd been *seen*?” Dream's not wearing his mask. Eret isn't wearing his sunglasses. Dream's always been better at schooling his expressions, though. Right now, he looks equally the part of concerned husband and amused bastard. “The rumor mill is nasty, your majesty. Wouldn't want your *affairs* to get mixed up.”

Eret's face grows hot. He whips around to find Dream standing right behind him.

“I am *not* having an *affair*,” she hisses, pushing him away, “Loveless as my marriage may be, I would not *deign* to *sully my husband's honor* and have an *affair*. ”

“Good.” Dream smirks, crossing his arms. “Pretty sure your husband's honor is the thing keeping you on the throne, anyway.”

“Gods, fuck *off*. I'm going to bed.” Eret rolls their eyes, shouldering past him and towards their bedroom. Dream catches his elbow as he passes, turning him around and pulling him to his chest. His other hand graces under Eret's chin, tilting her face towards him. In any other relationship, this would be romantic. A late night tryst in front of the fire. A performance of love. Eret glares at him. “What.”

“Would my own wife not grace me with a kiss?”

Pretty words won't get him anywhere. There is gunpowder under his cuticles.

“Not when you smell like a ravine, my lord,” she says coolly, “Desperation and damp cling to you even now. Don't act like we haven't been leaving in the same direction.”

Dream's gaze hardens. He lets go of them with an annoyed growl and heads for the chamber door.

“Remember who gave you that crown, highness,” he says over his shoulder, fixing his mask into place, “Remember I can take it away just as easily.”

“You never let me forget.”

The door shuts behind him. Bastard didn't even bother saying good night.

A marriage of necessity, he'd said. Eret would be king, the titles would be transferred after the wedding, but the marriage would be the thing to secure that. Dream would become king-consort, and Eret would be king. That's how it was supposed to work. That's how it *did* work. They closed their eyes and became king, and it's mad that Dream thought they'd never open them again.

The council doubts his rule at every second. Dissenters call for him to be taken off the throne, for the *real* king to return. Political contemporaries treat him with respect, but there is doubt in every word.

An enemy soldier, a no-name medic, marries into the crown and then takes it, and everyone is expected to treat him like real royalty. It's ridiculous. He'd be better off remaining as king-consort; at least he'd know his place like that. Someone with authority, but not *that* much authority. Someone who works *beside* the king, but is not king himself.

The princess, whose story ends once she is married off.

There isn't even a sense of mutual respect between nobles, like most political marriages have. It's barely companionate, it was hastily arranged, there's no spark or joy or even solidarity between them. No camaraderie. They don't even bother to pretend that they like each other outside of court events.

Eret had tried to make it work. Really, she did. She tried to see past all the anger and resentment that had led to her betrayal, to try and find love despite the crushing loss of everything she'd known and everyone she'd loved since she was nineteen. He thought his heart might flutter when he looked at him, or that he'd blush when Dream got close, or that the sex would get more interesting. It never happened. At this rate, it will never happen.

She doesn't even know what wing of the castle Dream sleeps in, if he sleeps at all.

As they rinse their face, Eret wonders how many more arguments like that they'll have. It wasn't the first. It won't be the last. Dream's enough of a hypocrite to continue this kind of shit. Eret's reckless enough to do the same. The axe is bound to fall on her neck if she sticks it out enough. Treason and mutiny would be a funny charge for a king, wouldn't it?

No. That's stupid. He can't think like that. It would mean that none of this was worth it.

She stares at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. It has to be worth it. It has to be.

Once a week, every week, for the following year, Eret brings supplies to Pogtopia. Once a week, every week, for the following year, he considers just... staying. He has this thought forty-nine times, once for every week he has brought supplies.

She could just. Run away. Change her name. Change his identity. Train their voice higher and grow their hair long. Hide their eyes. Tell people that they're blind.

He considers staying after Tubbo is violently executed in front of hundreds. He considers staying after Niki is rescued from enemy lines. She considers staying after Tommy picks up the supplies she brought and doesn't glare at her after. He considers staying after he spots Quackity in the infirmary with his arm in a sling and a busted lip. She considers staying after Wilbur asks for her by name while delirious with fever and cries into her shoulder when she visits.

They consider going back when Dream threatens them a day later.

There is war on the horizon. Pogtopia's growing restless. There's a nationwide manhunt in Manberg for its missing vice president. The Sovereign Municipality is functionally neutral

and continuing its public works efforts. Funding has been quietly allocated to hospitals and refugee services. Gods know they're going to need it soon.

She's in a meeting with the museum architects, discussing what to do about the pediment, when Dream storms into the meeting room. He barely gives Eret any time to excuse himself before he's dragging him through the door by the front of his shirt and into an adjacent hallway. There's nothing but a sealed window at the other end; Dream blocks their way out, even as he releases them.

"Your majesty," he starts.

"I have a name, husband."

"Fine. *Eret*." Dream stalks towards him until their bodies nearly touch, mask inches from his nose. "You—" He pokes their chest. "—need to remember your place."

"What, on the throne?" After two years of marriage, Eret knows better than to cower. She stands her ground, unwavering under Dream's impassive gaze.

"Again with the sass. You're *so* funny, highness." He's trying so very hard to loom over them. They don't let him. They're the same height, after all. This close, she can smell the gunpowder and wet rock. "I gave you the throne out of the goodness of my heart. Because *you* seemed like a worthy person to give it to. Do you know how easy it was?"

"Easy as signing a piece of paper," Eret drawls, not breaking eye contact.

"Then you know how easy it would be to take it away." It doesn't send fear through her heart like it probably should. No matter. "Burning a piece of paper is pretty damn easy. You've only been on the throne for two years. I *doubt* people are quite as loyal to you as they'd been to me."

"Don't be so certain, husband. The populace *loves* the public works I've installed."

"Oh, *please*." Dream crosses his arms and shifts his weight to one side. Eret can picture him rolling his eyes. "I have a *name*."

"Not like you ever use mine."

"What's your poison tolerance, highness?" It almost seems like a nonsequitur. Dream's tone is light. Like he's asking about the weather. Small talk. Eret's spine goes rigid.

"Higher than most," they sniff.

"What's your tolerance against withering, then?" Dream has never been good at keeping up that casualty, though. Annoyance creeps into his tone like rot creeps into floorboards.

"It's never affected me."

"Oh, yeah?" He steps forward, tone raising; Eret steps back, ignoring how his heart jumps high enough to choke him. "Then what's your tolerance to a knife in the throat? To having

your heart cut out? Tell me, highness, What's your fucking tolerance to being found dead in the royal bedchambers strangled in your own sheets?"

Dream stalks forward with every question, backing Eret up until her back hits stone brick. She is not afraid. She cannot be afraid. They roll their eyes, leaning back against the wall and crossing their arms.

"Oh, please," he scoffs, letting his voice carry, "We haven't slept in the same bed in *months*."

At the end of the hall, an eavesdropping attendant gasps. A flurry of whispers follow. Eret doesn't have to look to know they're being watched. Dream snarls under his breath, grabbing the collar of Eret's shirt and crowding him against the wall. His voice drops to a low, promising murmur.

"Keep going like this and I'll fucking kill you." He says it like a lover might. In another world, his breath might caress their ear. They do not shiver. "I'll make it look like an accident. I'll make it look like you did it yourself. I'll make sure it sticks, highness. As many times as I need to." She doesn't doubt him. She never has, not when it comes to matters like this. People had congratulated him, once, on marrying someone so proficient in combat. Skills like that were valued in lands as turbulent as the SMP's. He would be well protected, with a husband like that. "That crown is mine and we both know it. The only thing keeping it on your head is your own neck."

Eret swallows hard. He is not afraid. He cannot be afraid. He lets the flush rise to his cheeks, lets his voice raise an octave, lets it carry further than those threats ever would. This is a lovers' quarrel. This is an argument that could have been had in a bedroom. She will make it that, if it must be.

"Gods, your *majesty*, in front of so many people? The *staff* are watching," she says, scandalized. Even through the mask, she can see how Dream's eyes darken, how his face purples. Not breaking eye contact, she says, "Show a little *decorum*."

Dream takes a step back. He does not look down the hall at the tittering attendants in their huddle. He does not care. Eret knows he does not care.

It is not a surprise, then, when he slaps them.

Normally, hands laid on a royal person would be grounds for immediate arrest. Hands laid upon a royal person by their royal spouse is another matter entirely. Eret doesn't know the laws surrounding that one.

The smack echoes down the hall; Eret crashes to the side, glasses clattering to the floor, face stinging, barely catching himself on the wall. He holds his cheek with one hand, not looking at Dream, breathing hard. He swallows again. He should have stayed in Pogtopia. At the end of the hall, the attendants are silent. The only sound is his own harsh breathing, the beat of his own heart.

"We can discuss this later," Dream says.

“Later,” Eret repeats, choking on it. She does not look at him.

“I’ll dismiss the architects. You’re in no state to continue your meeting, your majesty.”

“Thank you, husband.”

They are back to their play-acting. This is a companionate marriage, after all. It stopped being convenient long, long ago.

Dream crushes their sunglasses underfoot as he leaves. Eret doesn’t look up until long after he’s gone.

They do not talk later. When Eret glances out her tower window, she spots Dream on horseback, racing northeast towards Pogtopia.

Once again, she thinks of Rapunzel.

For three days, things simmer. Like a pot on a stove, the liquid keeping everything down boils off, revealing the meat underneath. Soaked in brine, falling off the bone, ready to be torn apart by knives and teeth. Eret doesn’t know what will come first, the war, or the day she’s turned into an example. They make one extra supply run to Pogtopia while they still can, bag bulging with excess potion ingredients, spare books, and whatever else the royal coffers wouldn’t miss. It’s her own paycheck, after all.

He just prays that the masked, hooded man he had brushed shoulders with in the forest the night previous did not realize who he was.

Around the castle, rumors fly. The king’s husband has not been faithful. The king’s husband has been cruel. The king’s husband has not seen the royal bedchamber in months. The king’s husband, perhaps, is not happy with how their marriage has gone. The king, perhaps, is not long for the throne.

On that third day, again while Eret is busy, Dream finds time to interrupt her. This time, it’s in front of the royal court.

Petitioners are lined up and clamoring for attention. The war, the war, the war. What will the SMP be doing about the war? Provide aid here, protect people there, shore up defenses in the northeast, ask for help from the Badlands, do *something* with all that power. She wants to ask, *what power? It’s just a crown. It doesn’t **mean** anything.*

When Dream storms into the throne room, he is fully armed and armored. Fear drives through Eret’s heart like an icicle, freezing the blood in his veins. Courtiers jump back and gasp in fright, scramble away as Dream’s entourage stride in like they own the place.

Who was she kidding, really. They both knew who the other was the second their shoulders touched.

“There you are,” Dream sneers.

“Where else would I be?” Eret replies.

“Wherever it is you run off to at night, I’d presume.” A murmur ripples through the court.

“Not like you’d know,” Eret says coolly, “If the rumors are to be believed.” The murmurs grow louder, faster, like wind whistling through trees. At Dream’s side, Karl snickers. Punz smacks the back of his head with a hand, shutting him up. Eret cannot stop eyeing the wicked Netherite axe in Dream’s hand.

Marrying such a formidable fighter should have been a good thing. She should have been set for life. From her throne, Eret cannot help but think she is staring down her executioner. It wouldn’t take much. A single stroke of the axe. It would be easy. Stick out your neck enough times and you’re sure to have your throat slit.

“I’m in the middle of something, Dream,” she says, staring down at her husband with contempt. She hopes it comes across as contempt. She hopes that no one can hear the jackrabbit pace of her heart over the rumors’ flight.

“It can wait. Traitors aren’t fit to wear crowns such as yours.”

Eret scoffs, leaning back.

“That’s rich. Did you forget already how I got this throne? Two years of marriage, *husband*, and you already forget how we met.”

Dream’s hand tightens around his axe. One only wears a weapon like that if they do not intend to use it. Dream is not wearing it. There are plenty of ways out of the throne room. Eret just needs to remember which one is closest.

They pluck an ender pearl from the pouch on their belt, just in case.

“Guards?” Eret says, raising his voice, “Please escort my husband out of the throne room.”

No one moves. Dream snorts, taking a step forward. No guards spring to action. A hand lain upon a royal person is grounds for arrest, after all. Dream takes another step forward, and another, and another. He is on the dais before Eret can blink, his axe resting delicately against their neck.

“Careful, highness,” he says softly, “I don’t think you know what’s good for you anymore. I wouldn’t want you to lose your head.”

“And make good on the threats you deign appropriate for polite company?” She swallows; the axe does not bob with the motion, standing firm, cutting into her skin. Blood wells in the cut and traces down to the hollow of her throat. Someone in the court might scream. All the murmuring turns to static in Eret’s ears. The only thing that exists is the two of them and the axe at her neck.

“It would do you well to shut up, Eret.” Dream’s voice is level, hard. “You might actually learn something, for once.”

“You really will kill me, won’t you?” they whisper.

“I will,” Dream whispers back. He says it like they are back at the altar. The axe traces along their skin with a torturous slowness. It would only sting for a second.

Eret tosses the ender pearl carelessly. It does not go far, barely two meters to the right. That’s all the space he needs. He braces himself as it shatters against the floor, as he vanishes from the throne and reappears standing a few feet away. Dream yells in frustration, axe slamming into the dais hard enough to splinter the wood, but it does not matter.

Blood dripping from his neck, Eret runs.

There is no time to do anything else. No time to saddle up a horse, no time to grab his things. Most of his things are in his ender chest regardless, it’s fine, it’ll be fine. He has nothing but the clothes on his back and the things in his pockets, and he runs.

Their robe is abandoned somewhere near the Community House. Their crown is thrown somewhere into the Holy Land. For a moment, they consider stopping there, to take shelter in the church, but Dream has never given a shit about laws of nonviolence. What’s a king to a god? Not much, where Eret’s concerned. The better question may be what a priest is to a current king. What a traitor is to an abandoned throne.

She barely recognizes the forest as she runs through it, barely remembers her way. She crashes through the break like a frightened animal and falls like one, too, when her foot catches on a tree root. Distantly, a huntress gasps. Blood rushing in her ears, Eret imagines this to be their end.

“Eret?! Oh, my gods, Eret, what—”

There are slender hands on him a moment later, a call for *help me, get him up, hurry* called near his ear. That same voice is softer, a moment later, *what happened, who did this, can you hear me?*

They feel a little bad for being unable to answer. Niki’s always been good to them, after all.

Time passes in a blur. A cave wall covered in buttons. Being told to sit. Someone removing their bloodstained shirt. Antiseptic smell. Antiseptic sting. A hand clenched in theirs. A hiss of pain that might be their own. A cloth doused in healing potion and daubed against their skin to speed up the process. Questions asked of what happened and if they are okay that they are barely able to answer.

Conversation she only catches in snippets. *Go tell Wil. We don’t know. Will he trust. I got this. C’mon, this way.* There is a hand on hers and a familiar voice nearby. *Over here. Sit down. Just me.*

Eret finally comes back to his body as a warm bowl of stew is pushed into his hands. There is conversation further down the ravine, laughter and talking that echoes up the cavern walls, the crackle of a fire and someone strumming a guitar. It’s mess hour. Mind slowly coming

back online, their fingers curl around the bowl, and they look up at the person handing it to them.

“Hey,” Quackity says, smiling slightly, “You back in the land of the living?”

“Looks like it.” He scoots over, bowl warming his hands. Quackity sits beside him, holding one of his own. They’re further back in the ravine, away from the rest of the group. For the best, probably. “...What time is it?”

“Sevenish? Hard to tell.” Quackity takes a bite of his stew, thinking. “You’ve been here for... three hours? Four? Niki found you around three, I think. They don’t really let me topside, and Tubbo stole my watch.”

Maybe it’s Eret’s lack of a meal since breakfast, but the stew smells incredible. His stomach growls. Quackity laughs, but not unkindly. This, he thinks, is why he should have left for Pogtopia sooner.

Quackity catches her up on some of the comings and goings around the ravine. Wilbur knows she’s here, he had to, it would have been a *whole damn thing, y’know how he gets*, but he didn’t seem to mind. Tubbo’s doing well, Niki’s adjusted to rebellion life pretty easily, Techno’s been terrifying as always, even Fundy’s been seen around. Eret’s not so sure on how terrifying Techno might *actually* be, but Quackity is entitled to his opinions. She feels some of the day’s stress lifting from her shoulders as Technoblade himself walks by, making Quackity jump and hide behind her. She finds herself laughing.

Gods. He should have run off to Pogtopia sooner.

The lightness of dinner wears off as the night wears on, as Eret is shown to a dormitory and given an extra set of clothes. They’ll be able to pick up some of the slack around camp come morning, but they need to rest for now. They were running for hours, they should sleep, they were in a doubtlessly traumatic situation today. Someone accidentally calls them *your majesty* and they flinch.

He finds himself in that same place where he had taken dinner, sitting against the cold cave wall with his head between his knees and willing the wave of nausea that courses through him every few seconds to just *go away*. He should go home. He needs to go back. He can’t stay here, what would Dream say? He needs to— he has to—

“Thought I’d find you here.”

To Eret’s credit, she only startles slightly. Quackity sits down beside her, a brown bottle half-filled with a dark liquid in one hand. He offers it to her; she takes it without question, without looking at him, without wincing as she takes a deep swallow. The whiskey goes down harsh and unpleasant and warms them from the inside out. They pass the bottle back.

“Guess I’m predictable,” they rasp. Quackity laughs, taking a sip and coughing.

“Nah. I saw you coming over here.” He passes the bottle back. Eret snorts, taking another sip.

“Gods, this is awful,” she says, “The fuck is it?”

“No idea. Schlatt yelled at me when I suggested drinkin’ it for our anniversary.” Gods, anniversaries. Eret’s own anniversary is coming up. He takes another pull, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand. Quackity takes it back, examining the label. “So I stole it off the mantle when I ditched the bastard.”

“You know they’re still looking for you.”

Quackity rolls his eyes.

“Let ‘em look.” Another sip, another face of disgust. “He knows damn well where I went.”

Maybe it’s the alcohol talking, but another wave of dread washes through Eret’s body at those words.

“Oh, gods.”

“What?”

“You’re... not the only one with a husband doubtlessly looking for you.” He buries his face in his hands, drawing his knees up further. Gods.

Quackity lets out a sharp, cruel bark of laughter.

“Is he?”

“It was a *very* public marital spat, Alex. He’s got to be *furious*.” If she takes an extra-deep drink from the bottle, she’s got a good reason. “Threatened to kill me and everything. Gods, this is awful.” Quackity snorts, resting his head on their shoulder. It does funny things to Eret’s heart. The lanterns in the ravine seem to glow a little brighter.

“Can’t kill you if he can’t find you,” he says. Eret hums, tilting her head to rest against his. “We’ll just run away together. Leave it all behind and start over.”

“Hm?” Eret raises an eyebrow, glancing out of the corner of his eye at him.

“We could say *fuck it* to the war, y’know? Run off in the middle of the night.”

“Have a messy wartime affair? Elope before the battle can start?” Criseyde, indeed.

“Prime, yeah. It’d be fuckin’ funny.” Quackity sighs. “Not like they give a shit about us.”

They’re holding hands, his hand on top of theirs. Eret’s not sure when that happened. They don’t mind.

“I’m sorry,” she says, unbidden.

“...Yeah.” Quackity swallows, hand tightening over his. “Me... me, too.”

The whiskey goes forgotten. It would never work. They'll never do it. They've always been cowards, both of them. Running here was hard enough.

The night wears on. The solace is enough.

Schlatt dies surrounded by enemies. Manberg raises the white flag ten minutes later.

The dead are collected. The injured are tended to. Eret allows himself to be anonymous and, for once, enjoys it. He's just a medic. Let him help.

Wilbur slips back into his role as leader. He looks confident. Sure of himself. Yes, he'd been leading Pogtopia, but this is the Wilbur Eret knew – the one directing forces to help, the one standing proud in the sunlight.

The sunlight makes his shadow darker, though. She should have seen it coming.

Four days after Schlatt dies and one day after he is hastily and dishonorably interred in a hillside, General, no, *President* Soot makes a speech. He speaks of unity. He says he's proud. He says he's learned a lot.

He says he's stepping down. He says he needs to know how to say goodbye. She should have seen it coming.

He names Tubbo as interim president – if Tommy won't do it, the job should go to another founder. (Eret doesn't miss how Fundy's lip curls.) Tubbo makes a speech, too. He speaks of the same things Wilbur did, but with more hesitation and a tremor in his voice. He rubs the edge of his scars as he speaks. It's a nervous habit. (Wilbur stands beside her in the watching crowd. Old habits, Eret supposes. He takes her hand at one point. Squeezes it. She squeezes back.)

Tubbo finishes his speech. He wants to fix things. He wants to make things better. People cheer. The crowd starts to disperse. Celebrations are in order. They've won. They've done it.

(Wilbur says, "*I'll be back,*" only for Eret to hear and vanishes from her side. Before she loses him in the crowd, she sees him wiping his eyes.)

The celebrations can never last long, it seems. Still armed, still armored, citizens of the SMP begin attacking revelers. Technoblade takes the new president hostage, crossbow to his head. It is, once again, loaded with fireworks. Eret barely hears what he's saying over the chaos, over the din, over SMP soldiers in random battle and in their own haste to scramble away from Dream when he strolls their way.

As he reaches the podium, he realizes that Wilbur hasn't come back. Frantically, he scans the crowd, seeing nothing but countless citizens packed into city center, running, fighting, fleeing, staying. Anyone she runs past, she asks *Where's Wilbur? Where is he, have you seen him? Where's Wilbur?*

They remember his words from – what, a week ago? – about how badly he wanted to die. They remember what Quackity told them, about the secret room he'd followed Wilbur to, the one filled to the brim with explosives, the nation's anthem scribbled on the walls.

She should have seen it coming.

It starts as a rumble. A tremor shivers through the ground. One second, the square falls silent, like an angel passing through. The next second, Eret is knocked off his feet, his vision going white, all sound replaced with a high pitched ringing. Dirt raining down around them, all they can think is, *He did it. He actually did it.*

It's hard to breathe. Hard to think. The air is filled with smoke and dust. The fighting's stopped. People are still moving. Eret drags himself to the wrecked podium edge, weakly rising on a shaky elbow. Above the screaming, he hears "*Phil, kill me. Kill me, Phil. Look at them, they all want you to!*" They don't. Gods, please, they don't.

She hears a sword thrust through a body. She hears a gasp of pain, like all the air has left a pair of lungs. She hears coughing, rough, ragged breaths filled with blood. She hears metal clatter to the ground. She hears a sob. It isn't her own.

Time passes in another blur, minutes melting into each other. The world is moving in slow motion. There are Withers being built. Eret might be running. They don't know. Their entire body feels like a bruise. There are bodies. He didn't see Wilbur's. They know he's dead.

He doesn't know how he gets back to the palace. It's the middle of the night. The moon is high and full in the sky. It was midday a moment ago. She's slumped against a side door in the stables, comm in hand, screen full of messages she doesn't remember sending. It buzzes in their hand, a new message appearing.

<Dream> on my way down

<Dream> be right there, don't worry

He'll be right there. He'll be right there. Eret closes their eyes.

The door bursts open, light spilling into the darkened stable.

"Eret?"

Dream is beside them in a second, helping them stand, holding them close, checking them over. His movements are frantic, worried; he smooths their hair back, scanning their face. His eyes are big and green. There are freckles along the bridge of his nose. Eret clutches his shirt and stares at his face and remembers why they agreed to the marriage in the first place.

His hair is clean and he smells like pine soap; the comfort of familiarity is enough to make them sob. He had personally hunted them down five days ago. The gash on their back still isn't fully healed.

"*Oh, princess,*" Dream says, "*You're safe, thank fucking Prime, you're safe, I was so worried–*"

“I didn’t–” they gasp, “I didn’t know where else to go, I couldn’t–”

“After the fighting broke out, I lost you and–”

“I shouldn’t have run, I shouldn’t–”

“It’s okay, it’s okay, I know–”

And then he’s kissing her – on the face, on the forehead, on the mouth. Eret kisses him back when he can, but it isn’t easy. He’s just glad to be back. Dream’s just glad to *have him* back.

“It’s late,” Dream murmurs, lips against their temple, “We should get inside. Get you some rest. Draw a bath, maybe.”

“Please,” they say. They don’t want to go far from him. They are still covered in ash and dust and gunpowder. They’re still in their borrowed clothes. Dream wipes a tear away with a gentle thumb, catching her in a soft kiss.

“C’mon.” He pulls them towards the door, one hand in theirs, the other between their shoulder blades. “Let’s get ready for bed. It’s been a long day.”

His fingers press, through their shirt, against the wound. Eret’s too tired to even wince.

Chapter End Notes

works cited:

- misc fairy tales (grimm, andersen)
- le morte d'arthur (malory)
- troilus and crisseyde (chaucer)
- le roman de la rose (de lorris, de meun)

alright. be back Real Real Soon for ch. 2. yes this is a punzeret slowburn. yes punz is not formally introduced til chapter 2. trust me itll make sense. huck me a kudos and/or comment if you enjoyed! <3 <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The first stage of courtly love, adapted from Tuchman, is attraction to the lady, usually through a glance. This then develops into the second stage, in which the courtly lover worships his lady from afar without making his attraction known.

In which Punz gets a new job, Eret thinks back on their marriage, and a new city-state is formed.

Chapter Notes

finally. the love interest gets introduced. time to go both crazy and stupid.

cw unhealthy dreameret, controlling behavior, minor terrorism, minor character death, and mild PTSD

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The period after a war is always strange. Soldiers go home and find themselves without purpose. The economy does weird shit. There are food shortages and overabundances and markets losing employees and dozens of people now looking for work.

Nobody needs mercenaries after a war.

A copy of *Evoker Weekly* is dropped on Punz's doorstep Sunday morning. He picks it up, still in his night clothes, coffee in hand. It's too early for this. He needs to cancel his subscription. The cover is glossy, a photo of Dream ushering Eret away from a crowd taking up most of the page.

"I was tricked.": *INSIDE KING ERET'S KIDNAPPING AND RETURN TO THRONE.*

Now. That doesn't sound right. From what Punz remembers, Eret had very much run off on their own. Barely any coercion. Unless you count the axe to their neck. They shrug and take the magazine inside. Might make for an interesting read. And if it isn't, the Sunday crossword always goes hard.

According to the article, the late Wilbur Soot had convinced the king to running away to Pogtopia, but he tried to kill them during the battle, in retaliation for their betrayal two years ago. It was a revenge attempt all the way through, but now that Eret is no longer in that

situation and their mind is clear, they are happily back on the throne and with their king-consort. *Apparently*, this was also why Quackity had run away, too. Not for the revenge thing – the article implies that he and Wilbur were having an affair – but he’s also quoted as being tricked.

Punz snorts into his coffee. Yeah, okay.

It’s a dogshit article, either way. There is no way in hell Eret said any of that. Or Quackity. He’s barely had a free moment since the explosion, between Schlatt’s disaster of a funeral and the rebuilding efforts starting. Eret’s barely been seen, either. Something about still being shell-shocked from the war; she’d been close to the epicenter of the blast, from what Dream’s told Punz. Close enough to hear Soot’s last words. Fucked up, really. They feel bad for the guy.

On the table, Punz’s comm buzzes. Speaking of.

<Dream> hey

<Dream> got a job for you

<Dream> you gotta be officially on the books about it though

<Punz> what is it?

<Dream> eret needs a personal guard

<Dream> i suggested you

Punz raises an eyebrow. Personal guard. It’s a little bit like being a mercenary, he supposes. Being locked on the books means a contract in full writing, which helps with bookkeeping, but he’s not the biggest fan of that. Hard to do jobs that way, it’ll leave a paper trail.

<Punz> how much are you paying?

Apparently, Eret’s getting a personal guard. *That’s* new. It almost seems like her dear, beloved husband wants to look like he gives a fuck about her safety. What a shock.

He’s not stupid. He knows what this is. Now that he isn’t half-catatonic from hearing his former best friend die and all the bruises have healed, he’s able to think again. Yeah, it had been nice to have someone sleep in the same bed with them. Doesn’t mean he stuck around for a smoke after. Doesn’t mean he *cares*.

It’s ridiculous, anyway. Dream thinks all being king is is adventuring and having more power than the average person is used to. He’s never dealt with grain taxes or import tariffs. Eret thinks if he did, it’d make his brain leak from his ears.

Whatever. A personal guard. And, joy upon joys, he’s one of Dream’s *lackeys*, too. Punz. One of the ones who’d helped drive Eret off the throne in the first place. Gods save her. He won’t do much, anyway. Just, shit, she doesn’t know. Fucking stand there, she guesses. Hang out by the throne with a sword at the ready, just in case one of the visiting nobles gets a little too ornery. The thought makes him roll his eyes every single time.

She approves another request for aid to New L'Manberg's building efforts out of spite. The kingdom can afford it. And the gods know Tubbo needs all the help he can get.

Maybe he can get Punz to be more like an assistant. Help read the treaties when their vision gets too fucked. Help him organize files at the museum build site. That would be funny.

*("I don't need a **babysitter**," they insist, staring Dream down from behind their desk.*

"You were nearly killed in an explosion, your highness," Dream replies, as if deferring to her station gives his motivations purity, "It's for your safety."

"Must I remind you, husband, that I am perfectly capable on my own?"

Dream scoffs. "And you came running back when things became too much."

They bar him from their study, after that.)

Eret shakes his head, returning to the paperwork in front of him. Their signatures are starting to look like scribbles. Maybe... maybe they should be done for the day. This whole *personal guard* business has been giving her a headache, anyway.

Whatever. He'll live.

When they return to their quarters at the end of the day, Dream does not join them. They didn't expect him to, and it doesn't hurt, but the ever-present annoyance they feel towards him ticks up the slightest bit higher. Maybe *Punz* will be a better bedmate.

Eret snorts to herself. Wouldn't *that* be ironic. The press would have a *field day*.

Tomorrow, he'll be formally introduced to his new guard. It'll be one hell of an experiment, the very least. She can only hope Dream gets bored of it before any results can come in.

Right about now, Punz is remembering why they don't do much on-the-books work. The first day of *official* jobs is always like this: payment details and signing dotted lines and middlemen and not even getting *on* the job until halfway through the day. It's tedious as shit and he's getting supplied with standard-issue weapons, which is equally stupid. He's a personal guard. He should be able to use personal weapons.

At least they don't have to change their armor. But the extra trim is nice, they guess.

It's way past midday when they're *finally* able to get to Eret's study, led in personally by Dream himself. Dream opens the door and clears his throat, signaling their arrival.

"I thought I told you to stay out," Eret says as they enter, not looking up from his paperwork. He's wearing a pair of half-moon spectacles on a gold chain, sunglasses off to the side. Dream scoffs, stepping further in. Punz follows.

"You would so wound me, beloved, in front of a guest?"

“Fatally.” Eret signs a document, finally looking up. She purses her lips, eyebrows raising in barely-masked contempt as she looks over both of them. Her eyes are pure, blank white. If Punz were any lesser a man, he may have shivered. “Oh. The babysitter’s finally shown.”

“I’ll be back at eight, dinner money’s on the counter. Play nice, now.” And he’s gone, waltzing out of the study without another word. Eret rolls their eyes, motioning at Punz.

“Close the door.” He does. “And— you can sit. I’m literally just going to be signing papers for the rest of the day. We can discuss what being a *personal guard*—” She says it with nothing but disdain. “—means when I’m done.”

That’s the other thing with on-the-books jobs: there’s always a ton of time spent sitting around. He’s a hands-on guy, he’s not supposed to be stuck *sitting around*. Fine. Whatever. He’ll look for other jobs on his comm and see if they pay half as well as this one does. None of them will, but he’ll still look.

(“It’ll be easy,” Dream says, hands in his pockets. Punz is pretty sure king-consorts aren’t usually this casually dressed, nor calm about being in the open without guards, but Dream’s always been an enigma. It’s not like either of them are unarmed, and they’re just walking down the Prime Path, but it’s still strange. “All you’d have to do is report back to me at the end of the week.”

Punz hums, considering.

“What would I be reporting?”

“The usual.” Dream shrugs. “Comings and goings, who he hangs out with, if he’s up to anything weird. That sort of thing.”

“Why?”

*“He’s been reckless, y’know? The papers were all crazy about it. Almost died in the fighting and stuff. I mean, Prime’s sake, he fully **ran away** when things got bad. Gotta have someone to keep an eye on him.” Punz knows a double meaning when they hear one. They choose to not point out that Dream was fully the reason Eret fled in the first place. “Just, y’know, make sure he’s not joining any rebel factions again.”*

There it is. Dream’s rule of thumb has always been to keep Eret under his. This is just an extension.

“Yeah, makes sense.”)

An hour later, once Punz has made himself comfortable on the study’s cushy armchair and decided that if he’s going to spend most of his time here, this might as well be his spot, Eret puts their quill down and rubs their eyes under their glasses.

“Alright,” they sigh, “Alright, that’s— that’s done. Great. Excellent.” They rub their eyes again, setting their glasses aside; when they look up, they nearly jump at the sight of Punz in the chair. “Oh— *fuck*, you’re still here.” Another deep sigh. “Right. Right. You’re still here.”

He mumbles something under his breath, something about *almost forgot* and *not that the bastard'd let me*, just loud enough for Punz to hear.

She doesn't want him here. He doesn't really care about being here. They both have a figure watching over them and demanding that they be in contact. It appears that they're at an impasse.

"...How good are you at deciphering handwriting?" Eret asks, sounding for all the world like she's given up.

"Pretty good?"

"Then you might wind up useful, after all."

Eret isn't a bad boss, by any means. She's reasonable with her expectations, is sure to pay Punz if they work overtime, and never sends them on stupid fetch quests outside of their job description. The court never gets too rowdy, no huge political assassinations have been attempted, and he is, by all means, a good king. Good with getting shitty nobles to calm down, good at understanding the problems of his people, good at negotiating tariffs and taxes and trade agreements and how much aid to give to the rebuilding L'Manberg as a show of foreign goodwill. Punz is impressed, honestly. Back when they were working as Dream's merc of the week, there were people trying to beat his ass every other week. That might have been due to Dream's whole... way of being king, Machiavelli looking ass, but for the first month Punz works as Eret's personal guard, next to nothing major happens.

He does have to specify that it's *next* to nothing, however. There are rumblings along the east border, the bit closest to L'Manberg, of unrest. This is brought up to Eret countless times by countless other nobles: Lord Lore hasn't been court lately, could he be planning something? After all, if the neighbors could win their independence and become their own city-state, why couldn't *his* prefecture?

They send missives, for what it's worth. Not necessarily coherent ones, not necessarily ones that make sense when you compare them one missive to another, but they are certainly sent. Punz helps parse these in Eret's office, comparing previous with current to see what they mean.

"The demands keep changing," Eret says, handing over the latest letter sent by George's secretary, "This one's calling for me to abdicate entirely, while the previous wished for sovereignty and secession."

"I don't think George is the one actually writing these," Punz replies, skimming the letter, "Has he ever suggested this kind of thing before?" Eret rolls her eyes with a snort.

"He's part of that contingent that doesn't think I should be king since I married into the spot. You know the type. The radical ones wear a little bit of green on them." Yeah, he knows the type. More than one have tried to attack Eret before. None recently, thank Prime, but he's sure it'll happen again soon. Something about leaders versus founders versus puppets put on

the throne because their husbands didn't feel like it. At least, that's how Dream had explained it.

"Right, yeah."

"I just—" Eret rakes a hand through his hair, resting his chin in his palm. "I'm worried. I think things are going to escalate soon. Can't tell how. But I've got a feeling."

Hm. He'll have to follow up with George about that one. Maybe talk to Sapnap – he's pretty sure he's been in George's entourage since the war. The last thing Eret needs is more bloodshed on their soil. He'll do whatever he can to help prevent that. He's their personal guard. That's his job. And Punz is, above anything else, good at his job.

They lapse into an easy quiet, broken only by the occasional grumble or scoff as Eret tries to make sense of what the less reasonable nobles are demanding of her this time. She's wearing those half-moon glasses again, like she usually does when she works. It means that Punz can see her eyes. They've taken a moment to get used to, but he actually likes Eret's eyes. If he were smarter or more poetic, he might compare them to the finest quartz, to shining opals, to pearls lost in the green of a garden and found on the banks of paradise. In his preferred utilitarian modes, they're pretty.

At their side, Punz's comm buzzes.

<Dream> give me your status update here

<Dream> out of town rn

Dream says *out of town* like there are other city-states to go to. He's probably doing press in Hypixel or gallivanting the way real adults can't or trying to pull strings in someone else's government again.

<Punz> not much

<Punz> again

<Punz> nothing you care about

<Punz> trade deals and shit like that. museum stuff

He's not sure what Dream expected, really. Of course Eret isn't doing much rebellion, the rebellion is *over*. She's putting together exhibits for the museum and making sure her people are fed and housed. She's *being king*. Not like she has time to do much else, especially since Dream isn't keeping watch 24/7 and controlling what she can and can't do.

<Dream> ugh

<Dream> cool, i guess.

<Dream> let me know if anything changes

<Punz> will do.

A curl falls in Eret's eyes; he blows it to the side with a careless breath.

Punz's heart skips a beat. They're not sure why.

Dream is back by the end of the month. He has to be. Why wouldn't he be? It's his anniversary, after all.

The papers report on it, an interview is given, the people clamor for their beloved royal couple like the king doesn't have better things to do. They're like celebrities but worse. They're like celebrities but there are people plotting their downfalls and calling them both war criminals and demanding they give up their celebrity status. If Dream had stayed in Hypixel and remained a gladiator, a *real* celebrity, Eret thinks, they wouldn't be in this mess.

Smile, wave, pose for a photo. Kiss a baby on its head like you have the power to give benediction. Wave, smile, pose again. Eret hates the crowds and hates the media and hates their husband most of all.

Not everyone is happy about the anniversary, of course. It gets in the way of the court and it gets in the way of the people having serious political concerns. In the days leading up to the celebration, courtiers are practically fistfighting reporters to be heard. Dream speaks to George and his entourage privately. Apparently, there is a group of dissenters at the castle. They're trying to get in. The reporters will not let them, no matter how many times Eret tries to give them an audience.

Whatever the discussion with George was clearly didn't go well. Both parties are surly by the time they leave the chamber. Dream takes his place in the smaller throne beside Eret's and has the audacity to be annoyed at *her* for the whole mess. At least Punz is there. A voice of fucking reason in this madhouse. Eret's grown to quite appreciate his company. It's nice to be treated as an equal, for once. He can't say he's had that opportunity since L'Manberg or earlier.

Sometimes, Eret thinks about his wedding day. It wasn't the way he'd planned, really. It had been a pretty big deal, of course – royal weddings always are – but it hadn't gone the way he'd hoped when he was young. The ceremony was drawn out, the reception was overwhelming, her suit had pinched in all the wrong places. It wasn't really what she'd wanted, and it certainly isn't what she'd want now. Feigned affection, congratulations, winks tossed his way. Glasses of champagne and hoping he'll get drunk enough to pretend like he's having fun. To a degree, he was. It was a fun party. He'd been young and stupid and hadn't realized yet that Dream kissed him like he wanted to own him.

No members of Eret's family were there. Their mother couldn't make it. The family they'd found were all as good as lost. That part was their own damn fault, but, still. Were it happening now, he'd be praying to whoever was listening to spare him, let him not marry, and if he did, let him marry one who loves him. Emelye, married to a victorious Arcite, Palamon dead in the sand; Anne, proposed to at her first love's funeral; Tamora, stuck at the side of Saturninus, queen of the world but chosen on a whim, chosen as a tool, chosen out of spite, chosen to bring down the man who had wronged her and her new husband both.

Eret's Saturninus had become mercurial, as of late. He always was, but it's started to show more.

He kisses Dream at the anniversary ball, his husband's mask pulled up just enough to reveal a mouth, and pretends like it doesn't annoy him that he has to do it. The royals are happy.

They're in love. The king is on the throne by marriage, wed to the country's founder, and they are legitimate in that position.

Like most nights, Eret is the only one in the royal bedchamber that night.

Princesses are married off for love, as reward for deeds of valor, and then their stories end. She's not sad, but the bitterness left in her mouth is nothing new.

July rolls in hot. Construction continues in New L'Manberg. Political problems continue brewing. Eret does what he can to keep his head above water. Dream is around more often, almost certainly to keep up appearances, and Punz remains at their side to watch for trouble, be it theirs or someone else's.

People always get angrier when the heat starts to get to them, too. Eret's been aware of this all their life, from growing up to the first major fight they'd had with Wilbur to the spring heatwave that made them betray L'Manberg in the first place. It makes sense, then, that a group of angry dissenters arrives at the castle gates halfway through the month.

"My liege!" A messenger bursts into their study without knocking, red-faced and panting. The poor girl must have ran all the way up the stairs, flyaways sticking to her forehead with sweat. "The— outside, there's—"

"Breathe," Eret says, putting down his quill and motioning for Punz to sheath his sword. The messenger nods, catching her breath in the doorway. After a moment, Eret says, "Now, what's the matter?"

"Outside." The girl swallows hard. "There's— a group outside the gates. They're demanding you come down and speak to them. They said it can't wait, they'll storm the castle if you don't come down. The— his majesty the king-consort is already speaking with them, but—"

Eret exchanges a glance with Punz. If they don't get there soon, Dream might make things worse. She grimaces, nodding at the messenger and standing from her desk.

"Very well. Lead the way."

It's not like the protest necessarily a surprise; the frustration has been building all summer, since before the royal anniversary. Eret can only imagine that sped things along. It contributed to a lot of their own frustration, as well. They're loud enough to hear from the entry hall.

As he descends the palace steps, Punz and new guard Puffy at his sides, the crowd gathered just outside the gate grows even louder. Some wave signs, others brandish tools and weapons, a few have torches. Like a beacon, Dream stands on the inside, arms crossed, clearly arguing with the closest protesters. Hands are wrapped around wrought iron; the gate rattles with the force. Getting closer, Eret can see a few familiar figures in the crowd: Karl, in his multicolored hoodie; Sapnap, a sword at his side; George, in a crown and cape; and, most surprisingly of all, Quackity, wearing a suit and looking bored as Dream stomps around.

“Dear husband!” Eret calls, reaching the bottom of the steps. The performance is second nature. Dream turns around, fury set in his shoulders, face obscured by his mask. “What’s the matter here?”

“Their leadership won’t fucking talk to me,” Dream sneers, “Demanded to see the *real* king, which is *bullshit*.” He says the last word over his shoulder, drawing another jeer from the crowd.

“I *told* you, Dream.” Quackity, this time. When he brushes his hair out of his eyes, Eret notices two rings stacked on his finger. This time, Troilus breaks the promise. “As much as some of the people here *do* think you’re the so-called *real* king, you’re not the king regent. You’re the king *consort*. We can’t make negotiations with the king *consort*.”

“Prime, you fucking annoy me.” Dream shakes his head, turning to storm off. “Deal with them. I’m going inside.”

They must have really frustrated him. Eret doesn’t know if Dream’s ever given him this kind of power willingly. She approaches the gate warily; both Puffy and Punz have already drawn their blades. On the other side of the bars, Quackity regards her coolly, his posture relaxed but confident. She regards him back, just as appraising.

“What’s this about?”

“My clients have some questions about your claims to legitimacy.” Of course. Of *course*. Eret’s lip curls, but he nods. “If you’d give us an audience, I’m sure we can hash out a contract that both of us will be happy with.”

“And why are you the representative? Don’t you have your own country to help run?” When they first met, Quackity’d had dreams of becoming a politician, a lawyer. He’d been studying for it when they dated, until the war broke out and he took a few semesters in a different city. It seems like he’s finally made it. “Why get involved in the SMP’s politics?”

“Favor for a friend. *Lord Lore* asked me specifically.” He jabs a thumb towards George, who, despite all the racket, manages to look bored. “Will you let us in to speak, your majesty?”

Eret sighs. The mob looks angry enough to break down the gate if they so choose. She can’t risk that kind of security breach; it would make her look weak. She motions for the porter to open the gate. Quackity smiles a politician’s smile, cold and insincere. “Thank you.”

The gates start to open. The crowd starts to file in, George and Quackity leading, Sapnap and Karl following, the rest of the protestors behind. It’s as the last of the group are filtering in that Eret realizes why things feel so strange – it’s quiet. No one’s yelling anymore. The protestors aren’t calling for land or blood or power. Eret swallows the dread building in her throat, the same she’d felt before Wilbur blew up L’Manberg, holds her head high, and leads the way into the castle.

In front of him, at the top of the stairs, is Dream. Impassive. Watching. Behind him, there is some scuffling. Whispering. A gasp from Puffy and a hushed *your majesty*– from Punz. Doesn’t matter, though. The explosion would have caught him off guard either way.

The blast throws them forward, dirt and paving stones showering them from all angles. In an instant, people are screaming, guards running, alarms being sounded, gates being closed. Eret stumbles, scrambling up the steps and towards Dream, who catches them in his arms and might be saying *I'm here I'm here c'mon inside* over the ringing in their ears.

An assassination attempt. That was an assassination attempt. Wasn't it? Whatever it was, there's no way he's giving an audience *now*. There are guards rushing around, barking commands and helping people inside. Protestors are scattered around the courtyard, some running, some not. The smoke is clearing – when did the fire brigade arrive? – and it's clear that there's a crater at the gate: the metal is twisted and glowing hot in some places, the ground is torn up, and there are protestors there, too.

Bodies. In the crater. Blood and blast damage and people rushing in to help. She sees Karl's hoodie, scorched and covered in blood, among the wreckage, as though he wore it to be easily found should he die. She's going to be ill.

When Dream ushers him inside, all Eret can do is cling to him and hate himself for it.

The thing about the press is that everyone has a different idea of how things happened. Secretary Underscore was a traitor, he was innocent, he was exploded into a million little tiny pieces by a violent anarchist. Wilbur Soot was misunderstood, he was a madman, he wanted to hurt as many people as possible, he was forced to press that button. An explosion at the gates of the castle is no different: it was an act of terror, it was an assassination attempt, the bombs were planted by dissenters, the bombs were planted by the crown, there were over fifteen deaths, only a few were injured, the king himself was hurt and immediately rushed to hospital, the king coldly stood by and watched.

Punz knows the truth, of course. He'd been there. Eret had opened the gate and the bombs detonated shortly thereafter, originating from a group of dissidents wearing strips of bright green. He'd tried to warn them, but it hadn't been enough.

At least he isn't being accused of not doing his job. He's the king's personal guard. He has to protect them to the best of his ability, and he did. It had earned him a breathless thank you, a dazed, absent look before they turned away. More thanks than he'd expected, but there is a part of him that wishes they hadn't run to Dream. He's not sure where that came from.

There is a day's wait between the king agreeing to meet with the dissidents and the meeting itself. Plenty of time for Eret to recover. Plenty of time for the injured and dead to be brought somewhere safe. Plenty of time for rumors to spread. Luckily, only a few people will be allowed into the negotiations, himself included. He'll know the truth, and that's what matters.

The issues, as laid out in the meeting the next day, are as follows:

A number of people do not think Eret should be king. There are several reasons for this, including but not limited to: believing that since Dream is the founder of the SMP, he should remain king; believing that since Eret fled to Pogtopia during the war, they are a coward and a traitor and are not fit to rule; believing that Eret is not suited for the job, as they do not have the necessary diplomatic training royalty usually has; believing that Eret usurped the throne

by force, having married into royalty for the express purpose of taking over and bringing down everything in their wake; believing that George should be the rightful king, due to a contract that was written up in the early days of the SMP stating that George would be king should Dream retire; and believing that Eret does not have George's specific county's best interests at heart, so they should not be allowed to continue ruling.

That last reason brings up the second issue: George's county wants to secede from the SMP. Quackity argues that since L'Manberg was granted independence, the same should be possible for this group. They're calling themselves El Rapids nowadays. Punz notices Dream seething. Since the people of George's county don't like Eret and think George should be king, making him lord of his own city-state instead of just a county would be a win-win for everyone. Eret points out that the Museum is being built in George's county. Quackity replies that they have already considered that, and that construction would continue, just under the county's own building codes and labor requirements.

Multiple times throughout the discussion, Dream attempts to interject.

("They're king because I said they're king, what's so hard about that? It's not *your* decision for if they are or not, it's not a *democracy*.")

He is, more often than not, shut down by Quackity, whose years in law school served him well.

("I'm talking to the *king*, Dream. If I wanted the king-consort's opinion, I'd ask for it.")

To everyone's surprise, he does actually leave. Storm out, sure, amid poorly concealed threats, but leave nevertheless.

("If you're going to act like a child, husband, your presence may be more useful somewhere else.")

"Yeah, Dream, the adults are trying to talk. Have your tantrum next door.")

The rest of the meeting goes smoothly after that. At the end of the day, the long, difficult day, it is concluded that El Rapids will be granted independence from the Sovereign Municipality. They will be granted a space in meetings between city-states and may have their own labor codes, taxes, and laws. The Sovereign Municipality will provide aid in getting the state on its feet and when necessary in the future, and in return, El Rapids will allow for the continued construction of Sovereign Municipality building projects in El Rapids territory. Citizens who wish will be granted citizenship in both territories and borders will not be closed to any. The only outstanding condition to be met is that the people responsible for bombing the castle gates be apprehended and tried for domestic terrorism, which Quackity and George agree will be carried out posthaste. Things will be good.

When the now-foreign dignitaries have left, it's just Punz and Eret left in the board room. Eret slumps in her chair, head heavy in one hand.

"Prime," she mutters, "No more of that. Gods."

They won't say it, but watching Eret work was a rare treat. She's strong. Powerful. Can command a room with little effort. She's soft-spoken but never fails to draw attention. A good negotiator, too. If this is what being a guard is, watching someone confident work and being there to protect them should they need, Punz is happy to oblige. They're still in it for the money, but the pleasure of watching Eret work, of being in his company, is a reward itself. Eret rubs his eyes under his sunglasses before taking them off. He rests his head on the table, cushioned by an arm, and looks at Punz. The sliver of white he can see makes his stomach flip. He fights the urge to tuck Eret's hair behind their ear.

"Tea?" Eret says, like they haven't just sealed a high-level governmental contract.

"Tea sounds good," Punz replies, like he isn't jumping at the chance. Eret smiles at him; his stomach does another flip.

"The parlor, then." She stands from her chair, stretching. Punz traces the line of her neck with his eyes and tries to not blush. Eret doesn't seem to notice, thank fucking Prime, and brushes past him as he walks through the door. He follows immediately, admiring the way their loosened curls bounce as they walk.

Eret looks over their shoulder, glasses still off, and smiles at him again.

"Come on, then," they tease, "I still don't know how you take your tea. Wouldn't want the water to get cold while you're deciding." Punz nearly trips in his haste to get to her side. His heart's doing something odd. A medical problem?

Then it hits him, like an arrow from Cupid's own bow. Oh. Oh, fuck.

He's falling in love with his boss.

Chapter End Notes

works cited:

- the prince (machivelli)
- the pearl (middle english poem, author unknown)
- the knight's tale (chaucer)
- richard iii act 1, scene 2 (shakespeare)
- titus andronicus (shakespeare)

toss me a kudos and/or comment if you enjoyed! the feedback send a ping like the stardew valley :3 face directly to my brain <3

the works cited list will Just Continue To Grow. guy with a special interest in medieval literature and shakespeare voice hey yknow whats a good idea.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The third and fourth stages of courtly love are a passionate declaration of love by the courtly lover, followed by the lady's virtuous rejection.

In which Punz's job description changes, a hunt is had, Longest Night is celebrated, and feelings are confessed.

Chapter Notes

cw: hunting, shitty relationship dreameret, minor alcohol, The Egg, and mentions of the lead up to exile.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Summer rolls into fall rolls into winter. El Rapids is recognized as its own sovereign territory by the beginning of August. In the middle of October, L'Manberg officially names Tubbo its president, instead of just interim. The exterior of the museum is completed in the first week of November and exhibits are set to officially open the Friday after Longest Night.

Punz continues his work as Eret's personal guard and finds that, above all else, he enjoys it. It isn't quite the same as being a merc, considerably more consistent pay and *considerably* less workplace hazard, but he doesn't really miss the action. Sometimes it's nice to help host dinners or keep unruly courtiers in line or help read missives written in some scribe's dreadful handwriting. His past self would say he's getting soft, and while that may be true, it doesn't mean it's a bad thing. It gets him closer to Eret, which is special kind of delight. It is pleasure enough to see them and to be seen by them, and he doesn't know when he became quite so poetic.

At the start of September, Punz is returning from his lunch that he hears arguing from Eret's study and recognizes both voices. Oh, shit. It's muffled through the heavy oak door, but the conversation is clear enough.

*"Maybe they were right! Maybe you **are** trying to undermine me!"*

*"Oh, fucking **please**, Dream. You accuse me of this every other **gods-damned** month, can you get more **creative**?"*

*“It’s not your place to just fucking **grant independence!** It’s not your place to do half the shit you’ve done!”*

*“I know not if you remember, **husband**, but **you** were the one to sign the paper saying it **is!**”*
Inside, Dream groans in frustration; a hand slams on the desk. *“I’m doing my job as the fucking **king**, Dream. Sometimes that means making some fucking compromises.”*

*“This was never an issue when **I** was king.”* Punz can imagine just how Dream is crossing his arms, the same way a petulant child would.

*“**You**, my lord, were the commander of a war state and left everything to your advisors who had less of an idea of what they were doing than you did. Had you not given me the crown, you’d be stuck with ten warring city-states instead of a kingdom, a starving people, a collapsed economy, and a castle you don’t know how to staff. Hell, you wouldn’t even have a **castle** without me, I helped **build** the damn place!”*

*“Fine! Fine! You **saved** the fucking kingdom. You’re the **king**. You know how to **run a nation**. But if you don’t start running ideas by me before you fucking **codify** them, your **majesty**, you’re going to have bigger problems than a **starving people** or stupid fucking **county squabbling**.”*

“Go play adventurer somewhere else, Dream. I’m sure there’s a child lost in an abandoned mine that needs rescuing. You wouldn’t want them choking on bad air, now.”

Another snarl of frustration. Heavy footsteps stomping towards the door. Punz hides behind a suit of armor as a maskless Dream throws the study door open with a bang and storms down the hall in the opposite direction. Something in the study shatters. “Oh, *husband*, you forgot something!” Eret mockingly calls after him, throwing his mask like a discus and catching him in the back of the neck. She slams the study door a moment later, drowning out Dream’s angry mutters. From inside, Punz hears, “*Bastard! The fucking—*” before the sound descends into murmurs.

He waits a beat, two, three, and emerges from behind the armor. Dream is gone. More hesitant than he’d expect of himself, Punz knocks on the door. Muffled by the wood, Eret calls, “*Come in!*”

He’s picking up shards of glass from a puddle of ink when Punz enters, shoes splattered and fingertips stained in black. He looks up, relaxing half a fraction when he meets his eye. “Oh, Punz,” he says. He blinks once or twice, then looks back to his task. “Can you call for a maid? My damned inkwell fell.”

“O-Oh, yeah, of course.” He leans outside and catches the attention of a passing servant, the hall slightly less dead than it was a moment ago. It seems that once Dream left, everyone else came out of *their* hiding spots, too. When he returns, Eret is wiping their hands on a rag, the glass now resting in the trash. “Is…” he hazards, “...everything alright?”

“Oh, the usual.” Eret rolls his eyes, tossing the rag. “Marital issues. It’s as though the damn fool forgets why he put me on the throne on *purpose*.” They shake their head, tucking a loose hair behind their ear. “No matter. I’ve got things I need you to read over, I’m afraid the words

stopped having any meaning thirty minutes ago.” This time, Punz’s armchair winds up behind Eret’s desk instead of in front of it. For the maid to clean up the ink, of course.

When there’s a lull, Punz checks his comm.

<Dream> forget about the weekly reports.

<Dream> doesn’t matter.

<Dream> it isn’t like he’s even doing anything.

<Dream> you’ll still be paid, obviously.

Huh. Yeah, alright. He can live with that.

Along with a few others, Punz is knighted in November, and the party that follows is one they can barely remember. Challenges and party games that almost turn into fist fights and drinking songs and tales of knights from old kingdoms at parties similar to this. They help Eret to his quarters when he excuses himself from the festivities, a flush high in his cheeks, and do not see any reason to argue when he pulls them into the parlor and breaks out a bottle of top-shelf spiced rum.

“I *was* saving it for Longest Night,” they say as they dig through the drawers for a bottle opener, words slightly slurring, “but this feels as good a— where the hell is— a night as any, right?” Punz watches her from the armchair, a bit tipsy himself, admiring the way the firelight plays on the gold trim of her long, midnight blue skirt. The fabric swishes back and forth as she searches, the thread glittering as it catches the light. The robe she’d worn during the knighting ceremony and the party after lies splendidly forgotten over the edge of the couch, leaving her in a ruffled white dress shirt Punz thinks she looks handsome in. “And, really, I was just— *really*, I was just going to invite you ‘round then *anyway*, so, what’s a few weeks early? Not like— *aha!*”

He spins around and holds up the bottle opener triumphantly, shutting the drawer with the bump of his hip. Punz will blame the way his heart flutters on the alcohol already in his system. They were thinking about inviting him around for Longest Night. After that, he doesn’t remember much, save for how good the rum was and how Eret’s hair cascaded down their back when they let it all down from their bun. He couldn’t forget that last part if he’d wanted to, not with how his breath had caught. They’re beautiful. Punz doesn’t know how Dream doesn’t see it.

The rest of the month is spent busy in a way Punz never expected – court affairs and exhibit curation and royal Longest Night and New Year’s planning and putting the final touches on the museum before its opening. Eret doesn’t have to say it, but it’s obvious that he cares a hell of a lot more about *that* event than he does about the holidays. With the museum’s opening falling just between the two, they both have their plates full. It’s fast-paced without being life-threatening and is *much* more exciting than paperwork, but it leaves Punz exhausted at the end no matter what.

As a mercenary, he’s grown used to not having the same level of creature comforts during every job. Sometimes, he’ll get set up with an apartment in Hypixel with the finest indoor plumbing and entertainment systems money can buy and the most tricked-out firearm money

can't, and sometimes he'll be camped out in the woods in the middle of winter and spying on an enemy army to bring back information. This job is solidly on the better side of luxury; like, shit, they're able to *live* at their *own house* for it. Eret's offered them quarters and they have accepted, but they're able to just *go home* if they need. He's got a *lunch break* and gets paid overtime if he goes longer than his regular hours. A knight's work is technically never done, but labor laws are labor laws and nine paid hours of hanging out is nothing to complain about.

The other key difference with this job is that, unlike most others, he's able to have a social life. Mercenary work is a lonely business: long nights spent waiting for a target to arrive, long days spent traveling alone; the occasional check-in from a contractor, a job spent at one person's side, the odd escort quest. For a long time, Dream was the only damn person he'd talk to, save for short chats with Sapnap and Bad. This is... not that. Very decidedly not that. There are other knights. There are other guards. Yes, there is his charge, the person he's been assigned to guard, and yes, she is kind of his boss, but Eret actually *talks* to him. He's not there purely because he's being paid. He *wants* to hang out. Eret mentions something about a knight's social life being important for morale and court relations, but Punz never would have believed them until now.

As long as the SMP has been around, there has traditionally been a hunt two days before Longest Night. Back when it first started, Dream claimed it had something to do with customs from his homeland. Punz knew damn well Dream wasn't from anywhere before Hypixel, but back then, he wasn't going to argue. This year, the quarry was meant to be a deer, a hart. When the king gets word of a hoglin escaping into the royal hunting reserve, however, the idea suddenly becomes a hell of a lot more interesting.

"We've got eight hours until the hoglin zombifies," Eret announces as he surveys the forest map, the hunting party assembled before him, "and six before dark. If we kill it before the Overworld's temperatures do, we'll have a feast like none before." She rolls up the map, snorting derisively. "Hell, I don't think *Dream* ever had the balls to try. Which is why this is going to be interesting." Astride their horse, head held high and crown gleaming in the winter sun, Eret has never looked more regal. "Leden Lalami, Lady Melisande, and I will head south. Lords Emeric and Orelle: you'll go west – treat the river as your border. Blow the horns when you find it, though I'm sure the beast will be loud enough to hear regardless." He smirks, nodding his head towards the party at large. "Best of luck, my friends. I'm looking forward to our dinner."

The party splits, Emeric, Orelle, and their attendants heading west towards the river. Eret's half of the party starts moving south, hounds leading the way.

"You wanna bet we find it first?" Puffy says out of the corner of her mouth, leaning towards Punz. She was made captain of the guard shortly after being knighted. The title suits her.

"No shot. Orelle can't track for shit." Punz grins, reins in one hand, spear in the other.

"If Lord Orelle can't track where a *six foot wide* pig went by broken branches alone, I'd be *really* worried for his eyesight," Hbomb adds, drawing a snort from the king himself.

“Now, now,” Eret says, waving a hand, diction overly proper, “No shittalking my hunting party.” Mischief glimmers in the sliver of eyes Punz can see over their glasses. “I’d never send Lord Emeric off in the wrong direction with a *bad* tracker. I respect the man *far* too much.” The other two nobles hide their laughter behind their hands. Over their shoulder, Eret says, “Leden Lalami, you’re certain it went south?”

“So say the reports, your majesty.” One of the dogs barks, suddenly peeling off to the left. Leden Lalami points, steering his horse after it. “Look, in the break!”

Snapped and askew branches. Large, hurried hoofprints in the snow. A tree with a gouge taken out of the side, like a tusk had torn through the bark. The dogs all quickly caught the scent and bolted after the first, the hunters following swiftly along. Punz catches a glimpse of tan-pink hide and spurs their horse faster. One of Lady Melisande’s attendants blows the horn; the game is on.

They thunder through the forest like an oncoming storm, their hooves on the forest floor the rain, the snap of branches and baying of hounds the lightning. Wind whips past Punz’s face, cold and sharp, the thrill of the chase bubbling like champagne in his chest. It becomes a race, who of their party can find the hoglin first, Punz and Puffy and Hbomb neck and neck as they follow the dogs. Prime, they need to do this more *often*, this is *fun*.

They corner the hoglin in a clearing at the base of a small cliff. Its eyes gleam red with malice, its tusks covered in unknown blood. It stamps and huffs, ready to charge, but the hunters, too, are ready. The hounds keep the beast at bay – the hunters circle it with their spears, with their crossbows. Someone fires a bolt into the hoglin’s thick skull with a meaty *thud*. It squeals, very much alive, and rears back to charge.

Spears plunge into its neck, into its sides; bolts and arrows do the same. Punz has to admire the beast. It fights to its last and gives them a good run for their money. Blood sprays through the air, horses rear back, dogs snarl and snap at it and run away when it gets too close.

It’s Puffy that gets the final blow, a decisive spear thrust catching it in its temple, the point directly finding the brain. The hoglin gives a final, rattling shriek and falls down dead. The hunt is won. To the victors go the spoils.

The hoglin is tied up and sent back to the castle; the nobles follow quickly behind, with much congratulating to the successful party and between the hunters. This is the part that Punz missed while doing solo work – having friends. There was no one to say *hey, man, awesome kill*, or *sick work beating that guy’s head in*. He worked alone. He didn’t *want* anyone knowing what he’d done. But having Hbomb and Puffy there to compliment his tactical maneuver to get the hoglin cornered, and to be able to compliment them back on their battle directing and killing blows is a different kind of accomplishment.

The Longest Night feast is legendary. When the cooks bring out the roast hoglin, the largest golden apple Punz has ever seen wedged into its mouth, those who hadn’t been on the hunt gasp and clamor like never before. There is much revelry thereafter. Dancers form a reel in the middle of the hall as the fiddler begins a new song; Hbomb drags Punz in, who drags in Puffy, and somehow even Eret is pulled in. Mulled wine and a gorgeous selection of desserts

are brought out after the dance, with more tales told and more promises of parties like this in the future. New Year's will be more formal, of course, but this is a time for celebration, too.

Off to the side, Dream watches, arms crossed as he leans against a wall. With his mask on, Punz can't tell what it is he's thinking, but it can't be anything good. After dessert, as another dance is starting, they watch as a slightly tipsy Eret offers him a goblet, in as good cheer as the holiday asks. Dream pushes it away, saying something Punz is too far away to hear; Eret frowns, crestfallen, pulling the goblet back. Dream stalks out a moment later, leaving the king alone. She looks at the cups in her hands, forlorn. Punz can't fucking stand it. If Dream won't humor his own spouse, they will.

"My king," they start, approaching him. Eret looks up, cheeks coloring rosy in surprise.

"Ser Punz," he replies, blinking. His glasses have started to slip, revealing wide eyes. Punz extends a hand for the other goblet.

"May I?"

Eret hands it to him, a little flustered.

"A toast." Punz raises the cup and she follows. "To the holiday, to the museum's opening, and the good things to come." It gets Eret to smile – a small one, but a smile, nonetheless.

"To the good things to come."



(Art by [pinkminecraft!!](#))

He taps his goblet against theirs and takes a deep drink. Punz does the same, the wine sweet and warm on their tongue. Another song is starting, a lively, jovial dance. They place their

drained cup aside, blood warmed and confidence bolstered, and offer Eret their hand.

“May I be so bold as to ask my lady for a dance?”

Eret laughs, placing her own goblet aside and taking their hand, her eyes sparkling like stars.

“I’d be honored, ser knight.”

As the party winds down, the guests slowly departing, Eret pulls Punz by the hand into a curtained alcove. This close, as he’d been during the dance, he can smell their perfume. Lily of the valley and jasmine. Their hand is soft around his. The velvet curtain lets no outside light in, the both of them illuminated solely by the ambient fairy lights decking the halls. Punz can only hope it’s dim enough for Eret to not see their blush. If he does, perhaps he’ll chalk it up to the wine.

“I wanted to say.” His hand is still in hers. She squeezes it. Her voice is soft, like a secret.

“Thank you. For... making this night not suck as much as Dream had likely wanted it to.”

“Of course, my lady,” Punz says, just as quiet. “I’d be a sorry excuse for a knight if I didn’t.”

“You’re too kind.” Eret chuckles, ducking his head slightly. He meets Punz’s eye again, mischievous. “Almost making it sound like I have a sorry excuse for a husband.”

“May I speak freely?”

“Of course.”

“My king,” Punz says, squeezing their hand and leaning in closer, “I’m afraid you do.”

Eret laughs abruptly, making Punz laugh in turn. She pushes lightly at his chest with her free hand, still staying close.

“You cad!”

It just makes him laugh harder. Some say there is truth at the bottom of a wine glass. There is no way he’d be so bold sober. When they’ve both calmed down, only an occasional giggle slipping out, Punz squeezes their hand again.

“Happy Longest Night, Eret,” he says softly.

“Happy Longest Night, Punz,” she replies.

There hadn’t been much gift-giving at the party. That is usually done in private. In the privacy of the alcove, Eret ducks her head and kisses him on the cheek. She’s smiling. He can feel it against his skin. It’s a better gift than any he’ll receive for the rest of his life.

“Good night,” Eret whispers. His hand slips out of theirs, and in a rustle of velvet, he’s gone. Punz is left alone, buzzed and blushing, head spinning. They touch their cheek with an uncertain hand.

The alcove still smells like her perfume.

The museum opening goes off without a hitch. As do the royal celebrations for New Year's. The rest of January, on the other hand, does not go as smoothly.

It's a networking event, Punz tells himself, looking away from where the king and her consort are embraced in a swaying slow-dance. When the clock strikes midnight, Dream cups Eret's cheek in a gloved hand and kisses her deeply. When the royals leave, they leave together, which is a rare enough sight on its own. Punz drinks their champagne and pretends like he isn't green with envy. Farewell, 507. Here's to 508.

Less than a week into the new year, George's summer home in the SMP is burnt down. Witnesses say two teenagers fled the scene shortly before the blaze took full effect. When Tommy Innit is arrested, the debate goes up as to which nation's jurisdiction the crime should fall under. It's the SMP's land, the lord of El Rapids' house, and done by a citizen of L'Manberg. It's a mess. Eret nearly runs himself ragged trying to keep things in order and it barely works.

Later in the month, once the trial has started, Punz gets a call from Bad, who's discovered something strange near their house. A big, red egg, seemingly made of organic material and, according to Bad, radiating a viscerally unholy aura. He's already assembled a team, a group of Badlands contractors, SMP workers, and emissaries from the Holy Land to dig the cavern out further, but he wants someone he can trust to help check it out.

It's been making him act weird, he says. He's not sure if he likes what he might become if there isn't someone there to check him. And, quieter, he admits that it's already taken Skeppy.

Punz finds himself in a hazmat suit blessed by a Holy Land cleric, slowly creeping down the stairs as though the damn thing will jump at him the second it hears him approach. Bad is leading the way, dressed similarly, a lantern in his hand.

"It's bioluminescent, weirdly," he's saying, occasionally throwing glances over his shoulder. His horns poke out of the top of his hazmat suit, exposed to the air. That seems to defeat the entire purpose, but Punz isn't going to argue. "Like, the pods it's growing glow all on their own – we probably won't even *need* this when we get down there. It's actually kind of pretty, all *red* and glowing. Little bit translucent? Oh, *maybe* if we shine a light through it, we could see what's inside! That could—"

The cavern opens up, Bad still chattering about the egg and its properties. The first thing Punz notices is the temperature difference. Caves should be cold. Caves should be cold, but as they get closer to the egg, the room gets warmer and warmer. A bead of sweat traces down his neck. He walks closer.

Bad's gone quiet. When Punz looks at his face, they can see the wonder in his eyes; the egg's glowing pods reflect off his face shield. It's otherworldly. It's demonic. It has to be. The floor surrounding the thing is covered in red, creeping vines of various sizes, from pencil-thin to as thick around as their torso. If he looks too hard, he swears he can see them moving.

“It’s it beautiful?” Bad sighs.

“It’s...” Their mouth feels dry. They need to leave. This place isn’t right. “...red.”

“Yeah...” Bad takes another step closer. Then another. Then another, until he’s right beside the thing. He puts a hand against the egg’s uncomfortably plant-like shell, smiling; the purple of his hazmat suit almost looks blue beside it. “It really – Ow!” Bad jumps, pulling his hand back and shaking it. “It *bit* me!”

“It *bit* you?”

“I mean, I *guess*...” He trails off, then shakes his head, blinking a few times. “Shoot. We were– oh, shoot, sorry, we were just supposed to–”

“Maybe– Maybe you should back away.” There is no way he’s touching that thing. Absolutely fucking not. “Bad, you don’t know if– I mean, it could get through the hazmat suit, you don’t want to–”

“Yeah, yeah, right, um–” Bad takes a few steps back, wincing like he’s been burned as he steps on a root. “It bit me again!” He makes such an unserious pouty face that Punz almost forgets the demon in front of him is on a nearby city-state’s council. “I don’t think it likes that it’s not having an effect on me.” Punz doubts that. Like many things, they keep it to themselves. It’s not a mercenary’s job to have opinions. Their job is to serve.

Punz circles the thing while Bad describes the containment procedures they’ve been trying – encasing it in obsidian, surrounding it in holy water, putting it behind glass – but nothing seems to be working. It absorbed the obsidian, the water turned into *lava*, and the glass cracked but maybe they didn’t seal it tight enough? Maybe it’ll stop if they leave it alone? He doesn’t know, he’s just kind of talking, and, oh, there might be a hole in his hazmat suit, that’s not good– It all turns to background noise.

The egg is massive and pulses with a heartbeat almost too slow to detect. Punz stops to listen to it, getting closer to the shell. It’s only when a tendril wraps around his ankle that he actually *hears* it.

Anything you want. I can give it to you.

Punz inhales sharply, yanking their leg away. The tendril holds fast, pulling their ankle tighter.

Money. Power. Fame. I can give it to you if you let me in.

“Oh, what the hell?” His heart pounds in his ears. The whisper grows louder.

“Language,” Bad says idly, on the other side of the egg.

Your greatest desires. Your want for power. Your quest for money. Your love for your king retur–

“Fuck off,” Punz mutters, stomping on the tendril with his other foot. It recoils, withdrawing. “I already have what I want.”

They shake free and stalk over to Bad, dragging him away by the arm.

“Wh— *hey!*”

“We don’t need to be in here anymore. This thing’s bad news.” They don’t even look at him as they drag him up the rough-hewn staircase. “C’mon. Prime shower. Holy water.” No effect, their ass. Bad’s practically fighting him to get back down until they’re entirely topside again.

As he’s decontaminating, he thinks about the voice’s words. *Your love for your king returned.* He doesn’t need it, not really. It would be nice for his feelings to be returned, but he doesn’t need it. It’s satisfying enough to serve Eret, to be in his presence. It is pleasance enough to have a purpose – being at the side of the king – and to have that service rewarded in the kindness of her smile, the privilege of being under her opalescent gaze.

He’s not sure when he became so consumed. It’s keeping him going. It may be killing him. He may die if he doesn’t tell them, but the return of his love would not be necessary to save his life. He’s not sure how long he’s been staring at the shower knob.

Tomorrow, maybe. He’ll try to tell them tomorrow.

Tomorrow, as it turns out, is an unseasonably warm day. The skies are clear in the morning, but there’s a stormfront rolling in from the north. Hopefully it won’t ruin things. Hopefully *Punz* won’t ruin things.

Finding a proper time to confess is the tricky part. The rest – figuring out what to say, being alone with the object of his affections – is easy enough; he’s Eret’s personal guard, it won’t be *difficult* to get him alone. The issue lies in *when*. Eret’s the king *and* the curator of a museum: he’s always busy with one thing or another. With Tommy’s trial currently ongoing and the jury being made up almost entirely of Dream’s cronies, she has her hands full with trying to get some leniency for the kid. Punz has heard them arguing about it more than once, about how it’s going to appear rigged, *especially* with the obsidian wall being constructed that Eret knows *she* didn’t order, and how the SMP’s legal system has a loophole for royal pardons and the ability for the king to be able to choose punishment, but nothing seems to be getting through. Punz doesn’t even know what role Dream’s even *playing* in the trial. It’s very possible he’s the prosecutor.

The moment comes when Punz is accompanying Eret on his daily walk around the grounds. It’s to help destress, she’d said; a little fresh air to clear the mind, and then she can go back to work. Eret complains of an ache in his arm, an old war wound that acts up when it’s about to rain, but insists on going out regardless. It’s good for them. They need a little time to not think about their responsibilities.

The two of them are rounding the side of the stables when a crack of thunder splits the cloudy skies, the rain coming down hard and fast. Eret swears and pulls Punz under the nearest overhang; he’s glad for it, far too in his head to notice until the first drops of water hit him.

For a moment, they watch the rain fall, and watch further still as it turns to marble-sized hail that bounce and ricochet off the hard-packed dirt, sounding like a shower of pebbles on the wooden roof above them.

“Damn.” Eret leans against a beam, looking out at the storm. “Thought this wouldn’t hit until later.” Petrichor wafts in from outside, cool and fresh in the way winter often isn’t. Punz watches as Eret takes a deep breath in and slowly lets it out. “Alright,” he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose, head dropping, “Alright. You’ll just– it’s fine. You got enough of a walk.”

“We could probably just wait it out,” Punz suggests, taking a step towards them. Eret shakes her head, sighing.

“No, no...” He rubs his eyes and readjusts his sunglasses. “I need to get back to work, anyway.”

They don’t move. Neither does Punz. The rain pours down. It’s as good a time as he’s going to get.

“Your majesty,” Punz says tentatively, “May I speak freely?”

Eret waves him off, not looking at him. “No need for the formalities, Punz. It’s just us.”

“Right. Right.” Punz steels their nerves. “Eret.” She looks up. “I– I’m not saying this to– have anything change. Between us. I will gladly serve you no matter your reaction.” Eret raises a wary eyebrow, straightening up almost imperceptibly. If Punz doesn’t say it now, he may not have the opportunity again any time soon. “I am in love with you. I have fallen in love with you over these last six months. Being at your side has been an honor and a privilege unmatched.” Eret inhales sharply, eyes widening under her shades. “It– you don’t– have to do anything about it, if you don’t want to, but I had to say it. I am devoted in my service to you, no matter your response. Nothing needs to change if you do not will it so.” He bows his head. “I just... thought you should know.”

A beat. Another. Another. The weight is off his chest but his heart is pounding in his ears. Perhaps it will burst regardless.

“Punz...”

“Yes, my king.”

“I’m... flattered, really, but...” Eret wipes her palms on her skirt, hands balling in the fabric. “You– you know I can’t– I mean. What would *Dream* say?” Punz starts to reply, but Eret beats them to it. “No, no, it doesn’t *matter* what he’d say, I doubt he’d *care*, but if it got *out*... If it could– his image, if it– hell, *my* image, that would be a *mess*, and–” She laughs piteously, raking a hand through her hair. “And with times being as they are– I wouldn’t even– the *timing*–”

They clear their throat, standing up straight and looking Punz in the eye.

“I’m flattered,” he says, equal parts measured and reserved, “but I’m afraid there are too many factors happening right now for things to work out. I am married, I am the king, and you are my employee. I would not abuse my position in such a way.” He takes another deep breath. “I know not what my husband would say, were he to know, and I do not currently have time to entertain the possibility of an extramarital affair.” His expression softens. “You are wonderful, Punz. Your service has been immensely appreciated. But I cannot return your feelings at this time. Were things different, I may be able to, but right now...” She shakes her head. “It would never work.”

They’d feared this much. Expected it, perhaps. The rejection sits heavy in his heart, but it does not crush him. It doesn’t matter. They’d still dedicate their service to him. To be in her eye is fulfillment enough. They nod, bowing their head once more.

“I understand, my lady.”

“You’ve been nothing but an honest, loyal knight, and since June, have become a true friend and confidant.” Eret bites their cheek. She glances at the road. The hail has started to slow. “Go home, for now. I need... I need to get back to work.” Another sigh. “Thank you for telling me. I don’t want this to change anything, either. But... I think it would benefit the both of us if you returned tomorrow morning.”

“Of course, my lady.”

Eret takes a deep breath, straightening his skirts. His posture is tight as he crosses to the door back into the keep. Hand on the doorknob, he pauses, looking over his shoulder.

“Good day, ser knight.”

“Good day, your majesty.”

The door opens. There is the rustle of fabric, and booted footsteps down a stone corridor. The door closes.

Punz straightens up. Turns. Thunks his head against the stable wall.

“Fuck,” they say, “Shit. Alright.”

Chapter End Notes

works cited:

wife of bath's tale (chaucer)

the legend of dido (chaucer)

Illustration for this chapter done by the wonderful amazing incredible [pinkminecraft!!!](#)

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The fifth stage of courtly love is renewed wooing of the lady through oaths of virtue and eternal fealty.

In which the months pass, Eret has more than a few realizations, and Punz aids in an escape.

Chapter Notes

cw: grief, really shitty dreameret, exile mentions, referenced suicide, techno's execution

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The verdict for Tommy's trial is given on the first day of February: guilty on all charges of arson, perjury, obstruction of justice, and resisting arrest, and held in contempt of the court for multiple outbursts during the trial's final days. He is sentenced to two years of exile from L'Manberg, El Rapids, and the Sovereign Municipality, with potential for supervised visitation in six months. It will give him time to think and reform his ways, the judge states. If he can prove, by the time he's twenty-one, that he has learned his lesson, he may return.

There is nothing Eret can do to ease his punishment, no royal pardon they can give, no alternative. He is not one of their citizens. Between the court, the council, and their own damned husband, they are told that it cannot work that way, and that they can't do anything about it. It is cruel to exile someone in the dead of winter, but the verdict is final. At least he's not being thrown in the half-built prison being constructed in the Badlands. Eret can't imagine a worse fate.

"By the way," Dream says, on a rare occasion that they're both in the parlor, "I'm going with. Need to make sure the kid doesn't freeze to death in the first week, y'know?" Eret raises a skeptical eyebrow, looking up from his book. "Oh, c'mon, don't give me that look. I'm just gonna help him set up."

"Weren't you the main prosecution for the trial?"

"Well, *yeah*, but that doesn't mean I don't still *care*." Dream shoulders his pack. "I've gotten attached to him, he gets under your skin like that. Like... like an annoying little brother." Eret's lip curls. Right. Sure. "Anyway, don't burn the place down while I'm gone. Dunno when I'll be back. We're setting out in, like, thirty minutes."

“I think I’ll manage.” She returns to her book, glancing at the door as Dream opens it. “Husband?” He stops, turning slightly. Eret lets her words fill with venom, dripping from her lips like the fangs of a viper. “Tarry not long. I fear I may die of loneliness without your *loving* embrace.”

“Fear not, Lady Disdain,” Dream scoffs, “I’ll return faster than the crow flies.” When he yanks the door shut behind him, the picture frames rattle.

As soon as it’s confirmed that Dream is gone and not coming back for at *least* a few days, Eret gets to work.

The first thing he does is cancel the construction of the wall ordered in the county closest to L’Manberg. He knows damn well who ordered it and why, and it *certainly* wasn’t him *or* Lords Lore and Greymore. The materials will be redirected elsewhere and the workers compensated, but the construction is immediately halted. In fact, it’s reversed.

The proposed bills to increase tariffs to and from L’Manberg and to overtax them to hell and back are dropped. The hiring adverts for guards needed to patrol that section are removed, too. None of them were royally authorized, and, therefore, are illegitimate. If Dream hadn’t wanted L’Manberg to be its own entity, he shouldn’t have been the one to grant them independence. Stupid fucking move on his part, really. Eret’s going to have to set up a meeting with President Underscore in the near future. Get everything cleared up about this nonsense. Apologize for their husband’s actions.

February’s barely begun, but Eret has her work cut out for her.

The second step, now that Dream is out of the picture, is to really repair the connections he’s tried to sever. Community support. More public works. Listening to the people more. She’s the fucking king, she has that power, and with Dream gone, she’s going to use it.

When word comes from Dream that he’ll not be returning until the end of the month, Eret can only sigh in relief. Sure, it means he won’t be there for the Feast of St. Valency, but it’s not like their husband has been there for any *other* Prime Saint’s day, so why would the one reserved for lovers matter? Hell, Eret doesn’t even *believe* in Prime. It doesn’t matter. She isn’t bitter. She barely even remembers it’s Valency’s Feast until a passing churchgoer from the Holy Land bids her well.

“Was I meant to put out a statement about Valency’s Feast?” Eret asks Punz, as soon as the churchgoer is out of earshot. Punz shrugs.

“Do you celebrate it?”

Eret scoffs. “Not when my husband isn’t around.” He pulls his cloak a little closer as they walk. The day is bitterly cold— only a few hundred more feet until they’re safely in the museum. “No need to perform.”

He finds himself walking faster. To beat the cold. It’s making his eyes sting.

“Perform?” Punz hurries to catch up with them.

“As if you haven’t seen our quarrels,” Eret says, “Gods know we don’t talk like that *normally*. Dream just loves his dramatics, the bastard.”

The weight falls off his shoulders as he enters the museum. Finally. Finally, he can do something productive with his day. Signing orders and commanding meetings is fine, but this is tangible, this is real. The museum is *his* creation and it’s *his* to control. He bids good afternoon to the receptionist on duty and makes his way down the steps, into the archives and to his office. He likes the title of *curator* much more than *king*. Makes him feel like he’s actually building something.

Cloak put on the rack, coffee brewing in the pot, knuckles cracked, the afternoon ahead of her. It’ll be a good one. She won’t have to think about her stupid husband or the stupid “lovers’ holiday” he’s missing. Punz enters the office and puts his things down, too. Eret offers him a mug of coffee, already prepared the way he likes it. He smiles, small, grateful, and it makes Eret’s heart feel a little warmer than it was a few moments ago.

“What’s on the docket today?”

“We were recently gifted a map from the SMP’s earliest days. It’ll need a place to go and a plaque to describe it, but the first step is framing.” Eret stirs a little more sugar into their coffee, leaning against their desk. “It’s all in the map room already, I believe Melody found an appropriate frame last week.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Punz smiles over the rim of his mug. It’s been three weeks since he told Eret how he felt, and she’s never been more relieved that nothing came of it. Things have just been normal. Nothing had to change.

They finish their coffees in easy quiet. The mugs can be cleaned later. There’s a map that needs framing.

Eret feels a little bad that there’s nothing for Punz to do while she’s working save for sitting there and watching the door, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Their assistant, Melody, has already left the usual cartography things out for them, gods bless her. Usually, this kind of thing would be sent to the cartography team, but Eret has a soft spot for the early SMP stuff. It’s nice to see what people only a few years ago thought was worth writing down. And it’s highly possible one of their own might come through someday. That would be funny. This one, however, isn’t one of theirs. It’s a common map from before they arrived, detailing some of the small villages and towns that had been marked out before Dream came in and united all the counties.

As they lower the glass pane over the map, they say, “You know, Valency’s Feast used to be celebrated in May.”

“Really? When?”

“Ffffour? Hundred years ago? I think?” The pane falls in place. Eret reaches for the actual frame itself. “Earlier days of Prime, ‘round when Valency was canonized— or, sainted, I

guess. Already existed in *a* canon, but then Prime happened, and you know how the Prime Church loves to take pagan holidays into their own– anyway. Used to be at the height of spring; start of new life and all.”

“Huh. Cool.”

Quiet again. Not that Eret minds. It’s nice. He frames the map with the utmost care, humming to himself as he works. Sure, it would be *nicer* if it were actually spring, if they weren’t stuck in the dead of winter and Eret wasn’t stuck with an employee at his side on St. Valency’s instead of his *husband*, but this works. Punz has been more of a companion than Dream ever has, really. They’ve certainly been around more, and *certainly* have been more loyal.

Eret refuses to dwell on the confession he’d received the month prior. Nothing had changed, nothing needed to change, and therefore, nothing *did* change. The only thing that *did* is that Eret’s a touch less stressed now, and, by that measure, has more time to think about matters of the heart. The sunk-cost fallacy is a powerful drug, one she’s been hooked on since her wedding, but... she could always quit. Dream’s not going to love her, and she doesn’t love him, so she could always quit. Stop trying. Think about others who would be more loyal. Give more of a damn about them. And Punz...

No. No, no, not that. He can’t. That would be a misuse of their position as king and a cruel thing to do should feelings not spark in the same way they have for Punz. Nothing needs to change. Nothing needs to be different. Their heart does not flutter and their breath does not catch.

“How’s this look?” Eret says, looking over his shoulder. Punz stands to check out the map, and when they say it looks perfect, they’re smiling.

As February melts into March, so too does the protective barrier of ice around Eret’s heart start to give way.

Dream’s once-a-month visit is less than a day long; he drops by to see how things are doing, doesn’t care enough to get into the SMP’s politics, scoffs when Eret mentions sending Tommy a care package, and then leaves. According to castle staff, he’s been spotted around L’Manberg, either skulking around government buildings or conveniently catching President Underscore or his minutes man for conversations around the boardwalks. If someone asked Eret, she’d deny resenting him. The feeling still grows.

Meanwhile, Punz is at his side. Punz is at his side when needed and when not; he is around when he is off-duty and refuses Eret’s insistence on paying him overtime. He is there for fun as well as for work, will hang around more often than not, taking up space in Eret’s office and drinking all of his coffee. They listen attentively when Eret winds up on a tangent about some wildly unrelated topic to the one they have at hand and always wave him off when he apologizes for rambling on.

“I *like* when you start rambling, my liege,” he says.

“Well, then, I’ll—” Eret doesn’t know why she feels the need to brush out the wrinkles in her skirt. “I’ll just carry on, then.”

As soon as it’s warm enough, as soon as the waves aren’t as night-dark and frigid, Eret plans a joint beach clean-up event with the Badlands. The construction of that massive black prison in the center of the bay has left a ton of debris and trash along the shore. The thing is an eyesore even from here, and despite the clatter going on in the background as building continues, the event is nice. It gives Eret a chance to interact with people she normally wouldn’t, speak to people not normally represented in the court and in a more low-key context. A more cynical version of him would say it’s to help bolster their public image – look, here’s the king, interacting with the common folk, keeping his ear to the ground and in touch with what his citizens need– but that’s the last thing on his mind as the cleaning up continues. Bonds are strengthened. Alliances are confirmed. If public image is bolstered, that’s fine, too.

And it’s funny to watch Punz get attacked by seagulls every so often, but that’s another matter entirely.

A meeting is held in the middle of March to address a concern growing throughout the SMP. Mysterious red vines started appearing in January, fast-sprouting and faster-spreading. Every time they are cut down, they regrow twice as fast, and every attempt to burn them has resulted in sprouts coming out of the ashes. Citizens have been acting strange after coming into contact with them, too. Red eyes, a fascination with the vines and a desire to cultivate them, increased aggression when someone else tries to prune them. People have been, however slowly, working out how to deal with the issue, but many, Eret included, fear the vines may wildly outpace those efforts.

He tells the other nobles that the SMP is working closely with the Holy Land to deal with the issue, that all will be well. He can only hope he isn’t lying to them. They’ll just... have to keep an eye on it. Like they have to keep an eye on everything else in the kingdom. It’ll be fine. It’ll work out.

Punz promises as much when she expresses her worries about it to them over dinner, and she can’t help but believe them. His eyes, she notices, are a deep, vast blue; she could, if she isn’t careful, get lost in them. Cast out to sea like a dinghy from a fishing boat, set adrift and without a paddle, tossed along by the waves to be caught in the water’s clutches. If she looks too long, she may never escape. Punz smiles when they next catch her eye. Eret’s heart skips a beat. She hasn’t worn her sunglasses around them in months.

Dream visits on the third of April. He keeps the interactions short and once again mocks Eret’s request to bring things to Tommy.

“He’s doing *fiiiine*,” he says, head tipped back in annoyance, “Prime, your majesty, it’s like you don’t *trust* me.”

“I never have, dear husband, and never will,” Eret replies primly, holding out an envelope, “which is why I won’t bother for your word. Just give him the letter, at least. For his birthday.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Dream takes the letter and stuffs it into his pocket. “Ugh, way to fuckin’ remind me. Bet he’s gonna be *extra* whiny this week. How old’s he turning, like, twelve?”

He’s going to be nineteen. The same age Eret was when they’d joined L’Manberg. They do not remind Dream of either of these facts.

He’d missed Eret’s birthday, too. He’d been too busy trying to arrest Tommy. She’d barely had time for celebrations; hell, she’d only *remembered* it was her birthday when she found the note Punz left her. That was months ago. Eret doesn’t know why she feels miserable thinking about it now.

When Dream finally, blessedly leaves, less than three hours after arriving at the castle, Eret does not allow himself to breathe. He doesn’t need to. He just needs to work with his hands, to get into the dirt, to feel *useful*. There’s a walled garden on the castle’s east side that needs tending to. He’ll go do that. Punz isn’t around, which leaves Eret primarily with their own thoughts, but the weeds will be company enough.

He doesn’t really think he wants to be around people right now, anyway.

Trowel in hand, in a set of clothes no one will care if they get dirty, Eret sets about weeding the garden. The ground is finally loose enough for planting, the winter chill releasing its iron grip on the soil. This garden has gone neglected for a while. The ivy along the garden walls will need pruning. The flowerbeds will need to be turned over. Eret pulls up a bundle of wheatgrass by the roots and tries to feel a little less like shit.

“Are you gardening?”

Eret nearly jumps out of his skin as Ghostbur abruptly appears in front of him, peering down at him with big, mostly-opaque eyes.

“Ghostbur,” she says, blinking a few times and adjusting her glasses, “You scared me.”

“If you’re trying to make a proper garden, you aren’t doing a very good job of it. You have a lot of weeds everywhere.” He cocks his head in contemplation. “Unless you’re making an intentionally bad one?”

“I—” Gods, okay, company. Sure. Eret brushes his hair out of his face, feeling dirt smear on his forehead. “I’m cleaning it up, Ghostbur, what are— aren’t you supposed to be with Tommy?”

“Oh!” Ghostbur straightens up, rocking on his heels, hands clasped behind his back. “Well. Yes. And no. Kind of.” Eret raises an eyebrow, pausing her work for the moment. “Tommy sent me here. Very important mission. He said I had to go “Mad at Him Island” and see how much their lives suck without him, you know, because he’s a very big man and very important, and I said, but Tommy, I don’t *want* to go to “Mad at You Island,” because, Eret, you know this, I could *never* be mad at Tommy. But he said I had to and it was okay if *I* wasn’t mad at him, it’s everyone *else* that’s mad at him, which is wrong and stupid because

he is awesome and is doing very well out in Logstedshire – that’s what his exile place is called – without them.”

“And that’s why you’re here now?”

“No!” Ghostbur smiles. He does not elaborate. Eret motions for him to continue. “Oh, right. Right! So, I said to Tommy, I’m not *going* to Mad at You Island because I could never ever be mad at you, and he got very mad at *that* and stormed away and told me to fuck off when I tried to follow him. And Dream was there that day–” Eret purses his lips and returns to weeding. “–and *he* said to go to the mainland anyway, because everyone missed me and I could tell them how great and awesome Tommy is doing! But...” He trails off, frowning. “It was raining when he told me to go but – and, Eret, you know this also, because you keep the museum and know everything and are my very sworn rival in all things related to archives – I *melt* in the rain! And when I told Dream this, he said I had to leave Tommy alone, so I hid under some trees before walking back. And now I’m here! Now I’m here and leaving Tommy alone because Dream said it would be good.”

Eret forcefully yanks out a clump of weeds, spraying dirt through Ghostbur. They throw it onto the pile a little harder than they should.

“Of *course* it was Dream’s idea,” they mutter, reaching for the next cluster. That one, too, they rip up like they’re tearing someone asunder.

“Don’t you like Dream?” Ghostbur takes a seat in front of him and begins picking a handful of wild daisies. “You *did* marry him. Alivebur was *very* put out by that.” Eret ignores him, focusing much, much more on the weeds, thanks. “In his letters he would call you his own MacDuff, *cutting off the head of the foul hydra that I have become, though he does not realize two will return in its place* – real words he wrote! – but he much preferred to compare you to Queen Gertrude in private. You know, marrying his enemy after killing him and all.”

Eret grimaces at the soil. L’Manberg’s funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth her wedding table. It may as well have been lain with the bodies of those she’d once held dear – Tamora, no, Tantalus, *knowingly* serving the flesh of his kin and being punished eternally for it. That’s how the political cartoons of the time depicted it, at least.

Tamora hadn’t known. Eret knew damn well what he was doing. Redemption will always be just out of his reach.

“Such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty, calls virtue hypocrite, and puts a blister on the fair forehead of innocent love,” they mutter, recitation coming unbidden. They sigh, not looking at him. “No, Ghostbur. I don’t like him.”

“But do you... love him? A-Alivebur loved Sally, that’s why *he* married her, but–” Eret cuts him off with a bitter laugh. “You’re– you’re laughing, why–?”

“You think I love him? *Dream*? The– The man who’s made my life miserable since our wedding? The one who’s– who’s *isolated* me for gods know how long, reminding me how much you want me dead and how angry you were during your presidency any time I was mentioned?” Ghostbur’s face falls. “The one who fucking got– got *bored* of tormenting me

once the war was over and decided to use the same damn tactics on someone more fun to *play* with? That Dream?” He fists his hands in the dirt to stop himself from shaking. “No, Wilbur. I don’t fucking *love* him.”

It’s quiet for a moment. Eret is far too aware of his own heartbeat.

“...What do you mean, someone more fun to play with?” Ghostbur’s voice is yielding. Uncertain. Like he’ll be hurt for asking.

“The only difference—” Deep breath. There is no waver in her voice, there is no tremble to her words. She knows this and has known it since February. “The only difference between Tommy’s exile and my early kingship is my proximity to civilization, Ghostbur.” There. It’s out. It’s out, she has acknowledged it, and the person she told will forget in ten minutes. Dream had advocated hard for Tommy to receive the maximum punishment. No fucking wonder why.

“Oh...” A cold hand rests on top of theirs. “I’m sorry. That must have been very lonely.” Eret nods, not trusting herself to speak. Yeah. It was. Deep breath. In, out. “...Are you still lonely?”

They pause. They have friends, loved ones. They have their core of knights that they enjoy spending time with. They have the archivists. They have Punz, too, who has been a more faithful companion than any other they’ve known, for pay or not. For a moment, they allow themselves to think of his smile; a warmth blooms in their chest. If they loved *anyone*, it would be him, but—

Oh. Oh, spite. Are they in love with Punz?

“No,” she says, soft, “Not anymore.”

“Good!” Ghostbur stands, brushing himself off and carefully placing the finished daisy crown on Eret’s head. “You, Eret, have given me a lot to think about. Tommy’s probably getting lonely now. It’d be good for me to head back.”

“I think so, too. Don’t want him getting bored without you.” She stands as well, taking another deep breath and turning to Ghostbur. “Give him my regards, will you?”

“Mm-hm!” Ghostbur beams, nodding matter-of-factly. “I will tell him that The Eret of the SMP misses and says hello to one Tommy Innit and I will make sure that he is no longer lonely.”

“It was good to see you, Ghostbur.” Eret smiles softly. The crown of daisies rests in her hair, a gentle reminder of spring.

“It was good to see you too, Eret!” the spirit, himself a gentle reminder, chirps, “Good luck with your ugly garden!”

She watches as he wanders out of the walled courtyard and into a neighboring hall. A maid shrieks, followed quickly by an echoey “*Sorry, sorry!*” Eret laughs to herself as the sound

fades away.

Very sworn rival, indeed.

And they might be in love with Punz. That's an interesting realization to have amid a minor crisis about your shitty marriage. He's not sure why he suddenly feels flustered.

Right. Right. Back to work. Perhaps she can order some tulip bulbs. Or cornflowers. Peonies, maybe. This garden would look nice with some peonies. He'll have to ask what Punz's favorite flower is. Maybe they can grow those, too.

<Dream> need you for a job.

<Dream> quick one. paying up front.

<Dream> meet me at the lmanberg stage

<Punz> what time?

<Dream> 4

<Dream> make sure youre free tomorrow.

Dream tumbles out of the hastily-built stasis chamber in a flurry of purple sparks. Punz makes note of his singed, dirty hoodie, but does not comment. He smells gunpowder.

"You got a little..." They gesture to his face. Dream pulls his mask off, his own face fully featureless underneath, and cleans it off with a sleeve. Prime, they're never going to get used to that. Punz turns away, busying themselves with the architecture of the fortress basement. Interesting walls. Good support beams. Now clean, Dream secures the mask back in place.

"Thanks, man." He claps Punz on the shoulder as he passes, heading for the stairs. Time to walk and talk.

"You take care of everything else?"

"Yep. Nothing major, just had to check in on the kid." Dream stretches, cracking his neck and knuckles at the same time. "Pain in the ass to walk all the way back. Thanks for the assist."

"No problem."

They emerge from the tower on a hill on the outskirts of L'Manberg. Even from here, the city center looks empty. There is no movement on the boardwalks, no people going about their day. It looks like a ghost town.

"C'mon," Dream says, "Dunno how long we have 'til they get back."

They make their way to a residential building near city center, one directly overlooking the square. Wanted posters line nearby walls. All of the windows on one house are shattered. The docks are entirely devoid of people, stalls shuttered, houses all with curtains drawn. In the center of the platform, there is a podium, a cage, and a monstrously tall crane. If Punz squints, he can see the anvil hanging from the derrick.

“You’re gonna stay up here,” Dream says when they get to the roof. The sun is high and bright. It’s a lovely spring day. Perfect for an execution. “Pearl down when they get Techno in there. Distract until he can get out.”

“Where will you be?”

“On the ground. Couple hundred feet back.”

“Gotcha.”

A public execution of a widely known war criminal will certainly draw a crowd. It may be silent now, but once the action starts, it won’t be. Punz will try to keep his interference as non-lethal as possible. Cherry bombs and shoving people back with a shield. Sword only when necessary. No one needs to die on this job. Not by Punz’s hand, at least. He sharpens his sword anyway.

Dream taps his foot impatiently, checking the horizons every few minutes. He returns to Punz with an annoyed huff.

“Don’t know what’s taking them so long. He’s one guy, there’s like *four* of them, how hard could it be?”

“He lives pretty far away, right?” Dream waves them off with a *yeah, yeah*. Punz offers, “Gives us more time to shoot the shit. You’ve been gone for a while. What’s been happening with you?”

“I’d be back more if the kid wasn’t such a brat. Impossible to keep him in line.” Dream scoffs, leaning back against the roof wall with his arms crossed. “It’s like— he’s fucking impossible, y’know? We’re *making* progress, he’s actually started to *listen* to me, but, like.” An exasperated nod in lieu of an eye roll. “He’s not making it easy.” Dream looks at his nails, still soot-stained and caked in gunpowder. He brushes them off on his hoodie to no effect and tilts his head towards Punz. “What about you? How’s shit been looking after their majesty? They still being a coldhearted bitch about everything? That’s how they were last time *I* visited.”

I’m in love with him, Punz doesn’t say.

“She’s fine. Politics are politics. Boring stuff,” they say instead, shrugging. The sword grows sharper with every stroke of the whetstone. “Nothing you care about. No underground rebellions or anything since El Rapids, and they weren’t even involved in the rebel side of that.”

Dream snorts, head tipping back.

“You’re right. That *is* boring.”

Punz could tell him plenty of things. They could lie. They could tell the absolute truth. They could make up a dozen fake things about the king, they could tell him exactly what’s been going on in the castle, they could bore him to death with the details and bring his head back

on a pike. They could tell him exactly how they feel about Eret and how much she hates him, how many times she's expressed hating him. They could tell him that they have started to hate him, too. Loyalty to the object of one's employer's torment will do that to a person. Instead, he doesn't say anything. What's boring is boring. The conversation fades and for a while, they wait.

Thirty minutes later, a furtive, half-hidden Philza rushes into the house with the broken windows. Ten minutes after that, there is a commotion from the north side of the city. Voices. Shouting. The ringing of a bell to get the people's attention.

"That's my cue," says Dream. He tosses Punz an ender pearl and gets his own ready. "Places, please." Most of what Dream does is a performance. He throws the ender pearl overhand and vanishes with a salute. Showtime.

New L'Manberg's cabinet blusters into town like a parade. Hear ye, hear ye, the criminal has been apprehended. May all who wish come see his downfall. Quackity leads the charge, striding in on a heavily-armored horse over twice his size, ringing a bell in one hand and holding the reins in the other. Behind him, Tubbo and Fundy lead an unarmed, unarmored Technoblade by a chain attached to his bound wrists. They look more nervous than their captive does, but both have axes drawn. Bringing up the rear of the group is that new kid, the one from Hypixel, Ranboo or something. He looks nervous, too, but keeps getting distracted by Ghostbur and the blue sheep Ghostbur has on a lead.

Curtains are pulled back. People begin filing into the docks. Punz pulls his mask up over his nose. A crowd begins gathering in the city center as the horse is tied to a post and Technoblade is pushed into the open-top cage. He isn't resisting. The cabinet keeps acting like he will. Tubbo takes his place at the podium, tapping the microphone a few times. A hush falls over the square. His voice, far too young and yet with the heaviness of age, rings out from the loudspeakers.

"Technoblade has robbed this country of everything that made it special..."

The anvil sways dangerously overhead. Punz throws his ender pearl at the center of the square. He does not miss.

In a flash, he's in the middle of the action, sword and shield drawn, potions already flying from the bandolier across his chest. Weakness, slowness, harming. People begin to scream. Tubbo is yelling for security. Anyone who gets close is bashed with the shield, swung at with the sword. Punz throws long-fuse dynamite into the crowd and watches them scatter; some dive into the water, some flee for higher docks.

Boots pound on the boardwalks, running in every direction. Nothing explodes, but people are still shouting to get away. He tosses more potions to distract, but for all his efforts, the lever is still pulled.

The rope snaps. The anvil whistles as it falls. It meets Technoblade's skull with a sickening *crunch* that Punz does not see but sure as hell hears. He also hears the shattering of a Totem of Undying and the reknitting of sinew and bone and grey matter and the gasps of a man brought back from the edge of death. The magic bursts like a shockwave, knocking everyone

in the vicinity to the ground; Technoblade scrambles out of the warped, twisted cage and darts off through the crowd with only minimal stumble.

Punz bats another person back with their shield. In the confusion and chaos, no one seems to see where Techno went. Even *they* don't know. That means their work is done. Punz dives into the water, slams a splash potion of water breathing against their helmet, and lets themselves sink to the bottom of the man-made lake.

The shouting turns muted. The light becomes thin. Down here, the stone is jagged and sharp, blasted to bits and never cleaned up. Seagrass clings to the support beams. Punz considers themselves lucky their armor keeps them dry. Alright. Now to wait it out. He walks along the bottom of the crater, careful, cautious. The seagrass too thin to hide his movements, he has to be sneaky. He makes his way to the eastern edge, where an underground river connects the crater to the bay. It's pitch-dark and this potion won't last forever. Lantern in one hand, they risk the swim.

When they resurface on the other side, the chaos in the square hasn't fully calmed down, but the docks are empty. It gives them the space to hide in an abandoned fishing shack, remove their armor, and resume life as though they were a normal citizen. A crownsguard, sure, the king's most *loyal* crownsguard, even, but a citizen nevertheless.

He catches the dockworkers' trolley as it passes. A map on the inside says it goes all the way up the Scenic Route. Punz puts his hood up, keeps his head down, and lets it carry him all the way home.

On the evening of the third of May, the day after Technoblade's botched execution, Tommy Innit is declared dead by the city-state of L'Manberg.

It's meant to be the day Dream visits Eret. He always visits on the third of the month. For the entire day, Eret waits for their wayward husband to return. It leaves Eret in a state of awful restlessness: if they start working, he may interrupt them; if they leave, he may show up while they're out. He never arrives. When the evening paper declares Tommy dead of an apparent suicide with no body found, things click into place. Ah. That's where he is. Searching for the corpse. Her dissatisfaction in her marriage can only hold back the tidal wave of grief for so long, though. When Punz arrives to check on him, he breaks down almost immediately.

"I'm so sorry," Punz repeats, holding them in a tight hug, "I'm *so* sorry, Eret."

She doesn't have the words to describe it. Tears will have to be enough. She'd helped raise him. It's not fucking fair. He sends his condolences to Tubbo at midnight and is left on read almost immediately. Punz stays the night, sleeping on the couch. They're tempted to bring him to bed, for the sheer, selfish reason of not wanting to be alone. They are so, so tired of being alone.

Teams search the exile location for nearly a week trying to find the body before they give up. Eret joins them on one of those days.

When he steps out of the Nether portal, he is greeted by a grim site. At one end of a pathway, there is a large crater with a wall of scorched logs around one edge. A haphazard dock juts into the sea, the boards splintered and held in place by bent nails. On the beach, a faded umbrella sticks out of the sand, the half-buried remains of a towel sitting beneath it. A rough headstone sits off the side of the path, engraved with the initials M.D. and the sign of the Trickster. There is a desolate, threadbare tent, with nothing inside but a torn sleeping bag, a ripped, half-written letter and an empty, overturned chest. The letter is addressed to Ranboo and every greeting or joke written is crossed out, the scratches growing more and more violent as they progress. At the bottom of the page, miraculously intact, are the words *I can't do this anymore*. A few gold coins sit in the hole underneath where the chest must have sat. It looks like Tommy forgot them. They would have been enough for the ferry fare.

There are other signs of life around the site. The campfire is long-since burnt out, the remains of a meager soup left in the bottom of an overturned cooking pot. The ground is pockmarked with dynamite holes, almost all of which contain fragments of metal and wood – armor, tools. In the crater, she finds a charred, warped cowbell stained with blood; the name *Mushroom Henry* is engraved on the front. Henry. That had been the name of Tommy's favorite cow back in L'Manberg's early days.

He'd have been eleven, then. Eret would have been nineteen. She thinks she's going to be sick.

If she hadn't been in a position of power, could this have been her life? If he hadn't been living in a castle, would he be on a tent on the beach? Day in and day out, visited by Dream, who exists to torment him at every opportunity, to destroy his things, to belittle him and keep him locked away. She thinks of all the times Dream has shot down her ideas in council meetings. He thinks of all the times Dream's threatened him. She thinks of all the fucking times he's suggested he could take away her kingship, as simple as burning a piece of paper, as simple as lighting a stick of dynamite, as simple as destroying a life or a tool or a soul. It's Wilbur all over again, they realize. They don't remember backing up against a tree, but the bark pulls at their hair before their hands do.

It's Wilbur all over again and they saw the signs and they knew and they *knew* and they couldn't do a damn thing about it because *Dream* had his hands in it, *Dream* was pulling the strings, he'd driven *two* people to fucking kill themselves and Eret was, as he'd always been, *powerless* to stop it. Wilbur had isolated himself and Dream had encouraged it. Dream had isolated Tommy and spurred him on. Dream has kept Eret in that damned fucking castle with a sword constantly hanging over their head and a pair of scissors positioned for snipping the thread in their hands, just waiting for the day they cut it themselves. This could have been them. This could have been them, they realize, chest tight and constricting further. This could have been them, dead, never found. Worse, they *could* be found, dead by their own hand or by another. Dream had threatened to kill him enough times. How high is your tolerance for being strangled by your own bedsheets, your majesty?

She'd been less fun to play with. Less fun to take anger out on. She'd fought back and grown unresponsive to his bullshit and stopped being exciting. Dream had found a new toy and played with him until he broke. Eret excuses himself from the site before the day is through. He can't. He can't.

They won't have anything to bury. It's worse than if they did.

Dream returns the day before the funeral in a worse mood than ever. Eret doesn't try to ask him about it. She just dreads having to go to the service with him on her arm. She might fucking die if she has to, *gods*, she hates him. If he hadn't returned, they'd be able to go with Punz. They'd be able to attend with Punz at their side and fully express their fucking grief over the boy they helped their dead best friend raise. They'd feel safe enough to show some fucking emotion. To console Tubbo and Niki and whomever else. To let *himself* be consoled. Instead, she has to remain at Dream's side and wish she were anywhere else.

He dons a mourning veil that Tuesday and wishes, not for the first time, that he'd never ended the war. Gods know he never left it.

Chapter End Notes

works cited:

much ado about nothing, A1S1 (shakespeare)

parliament of fowles (chaucer)

macbeth (shakespeare)

hamlet A1S2, A3S4 (shakespeare)

titus andronicus (shakespeare)

myth of tantalus

myth of charon and the river styx

sword of damocles (cicero)

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The sixth stage of courtly love is moans of impending death due to unsatisfied desire. This is followed by acts of valor by the lover to win the lady's heart, the seventh stage. Once successful, this leads into the eighth stage: a secret consummation of love.

In which a tournament is held, loyalty is tested, and feelings are spoken on.

Chapter Notes

cw: shitty relationship dreameret, technically infidelity i guess, fade to black sex

finally, the ship does shippy things. godspeed.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After a week of Dream stomping around the castle and bringing everyone's mood down lower, Eret decides to hold a tournament. That'll be good for morale. Get people's minds off Tommy's funeral. Get them in for some games and some fighting, let them deal with excess frustrations, watch whatever silliness happens behind the scenes. It'll be fun.

Dream is in and out as she makes the plans, not that she needs his input. Some days, he's sulking in the throne room while Eret holds court, other days he's entirely gone. He's furious the entire time, of course, and his stupid mask does nothing to hide it. When he's standing still, he's either crossing his arms or tapping his foot or both, and it's a little embarrassing for the both of them, if Eret's being honest.

("If all you're going to do is pout, then you can leave.")

"Your majesty, I would *never* be so rude." Dream presses an affronted hand to his chest.

"Then, sir," Eret says, not looking up from their paperwork, "I suggest you act like you care about being there, instead of glowering at my courtiers like a spoiled little brat."

"What gives you the right to talk to me like that?" No honorific. He must be getting annoyed.

Disinterested, she replies, "The gods-damned crown you gave me, husband, which I regret taking as much as I regret not slitting your throat the last time we were in bed."

“Damn, princess,” Dream sneers. The hair at the back of Eret’s neck prickles uncomfortably. “Didn’t know you were into that.” As always, he slams the door behind him as he leaves.)

Regardless, the tourney is set for that weekend. Dream will be in attendance, though he will likely be sulking the whole time, and fighters, knights, adventurers, and bright-eyed hopefuls alike will be arriving to compete in the coming days. They’ll start with a dance on Friday – a maypole, maybe. That would be fun. A welcome ceremony for the challengers and an announcement of the game schedule, then off to the tourney itself. They’ll end on Sunday after a series of jousts, footraces, wrestling matches, single-combat matches, and team events. The winner will be crowned champion of the tournament. Yes. Yes, that sounds good.

Preparations go smoothly. Announcements are made. Soon, citizens from all corners of the kingdom are traveling to the palace to participate in the tournament. In less than a day, tents and stalls are set up in the nearby plain, all leading to the training grounds where the games will take place.

Clipboard in hand, Eret strolls through the main thoroughfare, making notes as he passes each stall and business. Punz follows a step behind, the picture of chivalric loyalty. With some time to dwell on his feelings for them, and *their* feelings for *him*, Eret has wondered exactly when something will happen. He’ll have to be the one to make the first move, of course. Punz is too respectful to break the oath he’d made of never bringing it up again should his feelings be unrequited.

“Are you already signed up to compete, Punz?” she says idly, looking at him out of the corner of her eye. His attention is immediately on her. Eret smirks internally.

“Yes, my king,” they say, following as Eret continues to walk. The sun shines, glinting off the purple medallion they wear. It complements the darker notes in their eyes, like the deepest cut of an amethyst. “For team combat, jousting, and the melee.”

“Do you plan on bearing any specific heraldry?”

“Just yours, my king.”

Pleased, she nods, marking off another attending stall on her clipboard.

“I’m sure you’ll make the kingdom proud.” Over their glasses, Eret jokingly winks at him. It’s very much worth it to watch Punz’s face briefly flush.

“I–” he starts, rooted in place. When Eret starts to walk away, he has to hurry to catch up. “I will do my best, my king.”

They don’t doubt him. They never have.

The first day of the tourney goes off without a hitch. The opening ceremonies finish with a maypole, despite it being a little late in the season. The dancers spin and twirl, ribbons overlapping and crossing in the air as they grow tighter and tighter around the central beam. The gathered attendants cheer as the dancers finish, the musicians hitting their final note with

a flourish. At the sound of the horn, Eret welcomes those attended to the tournament and declares that the games have begun. May the best competitor win.

As the crowds depart, the knights and competitive hopefuls going one way, the spectators going the other, Eret catches one last glimpse of Punz. He looks excited. He's surrounded by other members of Eret's guard, Puffy punching his shoulder, H following close behind. For the briefest moment, he looks over his shoulder, meeting Eret's eye. He smiles, sunnier than she's ever seen; Eret's breath catches. A moment later, he's swallowed into the crowd, and Eret's ladies in waiting pull her in the opposite direction.

There have been too many wars and conflicts during Eret's rule for a proper tourney to be held. In this moment of surprising peace, Eret finds himself actually able to enjoy the little things about the event – the smell of frying dough and roasted meat wafting through the thoroughfare, the chatter of spectators as they shuffle towards the proving field, the sight of colorful banners waving in the midmorning sun. He's able to appreciate the community around him, the *people* around him. It's not a festival, dirty word as it's become, but it *is* a celebration, and their people *deserve* a celebration. They may have missed May Day, and Valency's Feast hasn't been in May for hundreds of years, but the spirit of renewed life and the coming of summer is palpable. For a moment, they don't have to think about their problems. For a moment, they can have fun.

From the nobility's stands, Eret can see everything. She has a perfect view as the wrestling matches begin, as knights and young hopefuls alike try to pin their opponents. Puffy wins her bout handily, so quickly Eret almost feels bad for the poor bastard facing her. It's extremely satisfying to watch his captain of the guard win in five seconds flat, however. The Sovereign Municipality's training and standards are simply unmatched.

When Puffy wins the final match, marking her as champion of the tourney's wrestling competition, she dedicates her win to Niki, crowning her Queen of Love and Beauty. Eret sees the two of them sitting together during lunch, Puffy's arm around Niki's waist, a bouquet of roses on the bench next to them. One of the other knights addresses Niki as queen, making some rib to Puffy about how she crowned the right girl. It's good to see that Niki has found someone whose shoulder she can hide her blushing face in when embarrassed.

Dream arrives sometime during the mock siege during the team combat event, falling into the seat beside Eret heavily. He sits with his head resting against one fist, head tilted to them. They can't see his eyes, but they know he's glaring.

"Look. I'm here. Happy?"

Of course she isn't. Eret keeps her eyes on the mock battlefield.

"Yes. You may leave after the battle is won."

"How *generous*, your majesty." He slumps in his seat, arms crossed, and watches the match. Eret doesn't bother to grace him with an answer. He simply returns to watching the mock battle and discussing the competitors with Leden Lalami. They try to keep a special eye on Punz, though it's hard to pick him out from the sea of similarly-armored soldiers. He's on the blue team, the defenders. Eret's pretty sure he's the one commanding the group. She feels a

funny sense of pride at that. Again, the Sovereign Municipality's dedication to quality guards. When she peers at him with her opera glasses, she can't help but notice how handsome he looks.

Dream leaves as soon as a winner is declared, muttering something about a waste of his fuckin' time and how that brat could be anywhere by now. They won't miss him at dinner. If he wants to chase ghosts all night, he's free to do so. He misses an excellent meal and good times with friends. His loss.

The second day's events are footraces in the morning and jousting in the afternoon. Punz does not win the joust, getting knocked from his horse in his third round, but Eret feels that same sense of pride – or is it possession? – seeing him bearing their crest. He is *their* knight, the shield says. He is loyal to *them* and *them* specifically.

...She begins to feel as though she may die if she does not tell them how she feels about this. And about them, specifically. And if she doesn't get the opportunity to kiss them. Or take them to bed. Several of these things, actually, may be the cause of her demise, should she be unable to do them.

During dinner that night, he manages to catch Punz alone for but a moment.

"Ser Punz," they greet, catching his attention.

"My liege," he says, nodding to them respectfully.

"You did well in the joust. I was quite proud." Punz's cheeks briefly color a dusty pink. He ducks his head in another small bow, if only to hide his blush with modesty.

"It's my honor, my lady," he says. It takes quite the effort to not kiss him right there and then. "I can only hope my efforts tomorrow will impress you similarly."

"So that you may hear such kind words again?" Eret teases, raising an eyebrow.

Punz snorts, rolling his eyes with a grin.

"I'd do it even if you *weren't* gonna compliment me after," he says. Despite his joking tone, there is sincerity to his words. "I mean, I *want* to impress you, Eret."

Eret's heart beats faster.

"Would you lose the tournament if I told you?" He doesn't know where the question comes from. Punz meets his eye, his gaze unwavering, his voice certain.

"Yes."

"Would you drop out if I demanded it?"

"Yes."

Her heart pounds. Blood rushes in her ears. They are off to the side of the crowded banquet hall and the noise of the room is nothing to her. She isn't sure if they've been standing this close the entire time, or if they'd suddenly been drawn nearer.

"Would you win the entire competition tomorrow if I asked?"

"Yes, my lady," Punz breathes. If Eret does not break eye contact now, he may do something improper. If he looks away, he may die. It is a good thing he has never died before. Hopefully the respawn will be quick.

Eret grins, pushing at Punz's chest and breaking his gaze.

"Then I'd better see you win tomorrow, ser knight." Full mischief, she meets his eye one more time. "Your king expects it of you."

"I will."

Eret takes a step away and curtsies in jest. Punz half-bows at the waist, just as playful. It is only a matter of time before their dance reaches its crescendo.

The third day is dedicated entirely to the melee, one-on-one duels between competitors. Whoever wins this will be crowned winner of the entire tournament. It is an honor none can pass up. The competition is going to be fierce, and the competitors even moreso. Their efforts will be wasted, though. Eret already knows who will come out victorious.

Dream has returned to watch the day's proceedings. It is only proper for the king-consort to be there on the final day of a tournament. Eret doesn't pay him any mind, though. His attention is very firmly elsewhere.

The first few duels are impressive, but they are nothing compared to what will come. As each match wears on, Eret's anticipation only grows. Soon. Soon, he has to be fighting soon. One duel ends. As the herald announces the next competitors, Eret immediately snaps to attention.

Bearing the crest of the king on his shield, Ser Punz, of the Sovereign Municipality.

His armor is made from steel so fine it glimmers white, his helm, greaves, and boots lined with amethyst alloy, breastplate inlaid with gold. His hair gleams platinum under the high morning sun as he shakes his opponent's hand. When he dons his helmet, Eret can imagine the determined look in his eyes, the drive to win. He draws his sword. So does his opponent. A count of three, followed by a whistle.

The competitors rush forward and meet in the middle in a crashing of steel, metal ringing as their swords make contact. Punz fights like a thunderstorm, heavy blows coupled with strikes of pure energy. He is sure-footed and does not falter; his opponent tries to knock him off balance with a blow to his side and it does nothing. Punz shoves them back with his shield, sweeping their legs out from under them. The match is called with the point of his sword held under his opponent's chin. He has the grace to help them up afterwards.

The day wears on. Bout after bout is fought, combatant after combatant is felled. Punz fights for glory, for honor, for loyalty. If Eret told him to throw their last match, he does not doubt that they would listen. When they remove their helmet and shake out their hair after a particularly tough round, Eret finds his breath catching and his heart racing. Should they win, their prize will be more than just honor.

The pool of competitors grows smaller and smaller. Soon, there are only two left.

The sun has started to sink in the sky, turning all it touches to gold. Punz shakes the hand of his final opponent and dons his helmet for the final time. His shield, worn with battle, still bears his king's crest. Eret leans forward in her seat, hands twisting nervously in the fabric of her skirt.

The knights take position. The mark is called. Three, two, one, *begin*.

Despite the lateness in the tournament, despite how tired they must be and the injuries already suffered, both fighters run at each other with full force. Their blows ring across the battlefield, the crowd cheering and yelling for their preferred to win. Punz knocks the other knight away with a strike that splinters the other's shield, dodging deftly as they charge at him again. It is a brutal display of arms, of strength. There are times where it seems Punz may fall, but he bounces back a moment later. He is like a tidal wave, unstoppable, unrelenting, crashing down upon the surf with all his might.

With one final, ringing kick to their chest, the other knight falls and does not move to stand. Punz is left standing. They raise their sword high. The crowd explodes with cheers as they are declared victor. Eret cheers along with them; even *Dream* manages to look excited. Punz helps his opponent up and firmly shakes their hand. They both fought well. They should both be proud.

With all tournaments previous, the king has been the one to give the champion their laurels. Eret's hands nearly shake as an attendant hands him the wreath. When Punz removes his helmet, he is cast full gold in the fading sunlight, resplendent.

They approach the nobles' stands and kneel before their king. The air feels electric as Eret places the wreath upon their bowed head.

"Rise, Ser Punz," she says, letting her voice carry, "Champion of this tournament." Punz stands. Eret continues, "You have fought valiantly and have achieved your hard-earned glory. Your honor has been proven upon this field, and the kingdom recognizes you for your prowess." She takes a deep breath. "Is there anyone you wish to dedicate this victory to?"

Punz meets his eye directly. There is a smear of armor oil on his forehead. Eret feels the urge to wipe it off.

"I only wish to dedicate this victory to my fair king," Punz says, never breaking eye contact. They are, perhaps, the only two people in the world. "My honor is the kingdom's, and the kingdom is its king. My victory is yours." Eret can barely breathe, too stunned to move. Punz, thank the gods, kneels again before rash desire can make her do something truly stupid.

The crowd again erupts in cheers, descending from the stands and onto the battlefield. Punz is swept away by knights and spectators alike, pulled towards the castle. Dream vanishes into the group and is gone from sight in seconds. Eret remains at the base of the nobles' stands until many have cleared, heart still pounding. It is not until the other nobles tug at his sleeve that he realizes how long he's been standing there. Right. Right.

It's time to wash up. The feast will be beginning soon.

Dressed in a fine, fresh gown, hair done into an elaborate bun, and makeup reapplied by expert hands, Eret makes his way around the banquet hall, mingling with the competitors and nobility alike. King-consort Dream will not be joining them, a servant informs him. No loss. There are other things on both of their minds, after all.

The hall is done up with the same level of splendor as it was for Longest Night and is twice as lively. Conversation flows as the meal is served, quiets as Eret gives a toast to the champions, and resumes a moment later. Laughter and song echo off the ceiling, the smell of good food and drink for all filling the air. Goblets clink together, cutlery knocks against plates, an excellent time is had by all.

As the celebrations wind down, Eret excuses himself from the table. It has gone on long enough that no one will miss his absence. As she rises, she catches Punz's eye. She doesn't know how long they've been looking at her. Eret inclines his head towards the door. Punz nods, barely perceptible. Her heartbeat quickens, and she makes her exit.

The hallway is empty. No one is around. This, too, is the same as the Longest Night party. It is the same hallway, and from here, they can see the same alcove they had pulled him into then.

Punz emerges from the great hall and closes the door behind him, muffling the sounds of the party. When Eret looks at him, all air leaves the room.

Without thinking, they grab his hand and drag him into that very same alcove. The velvet curtain falls behind them with a swish. In the dim light, Eret can see how his face flushes.

"Eret--"

She kisses them. Without a word more, without a thought more, she kisses them, takes their face in her hands and presses them against the wall, kisses them like she'd wanted to do during the tournament, like she'd wanted to in her study, like she'd wanted to when they confessed their love in that stable. Punz makes a sound of muffled surprise; his hands find their hips and after a moment, he kisses them back. Their body presses against his; they can feel his heart beating in his chest. She kisses him deeply, openly, needing this like she needs air. His hands are gripping her hips and his hair is soft and clean under their hand, he kisses her back like his life fucking depends on it. Gods. Gods, who knows, maybe it does, maybe he felt the same way they were feeling, like he might die if he never gets the chance to kiss them.

Eret pulls back to breathe, forehead pressed against Punz's. He kisses the corner of her mouth, her jaw, her ear. So long have their bodies concealed themselves when their hearts have so swelled. So long has Eret wished for the touch of his lips on their skin. He nips at their neck and they have to stifle a gasp for fear of being caught. When he flips them around, takes the moment to press *them* against the wall, a bolt of pure *need* shoots through them. Eret nearly whines, dragging him back up and muffling their further sounds with his mouth.

"You have—" Punz says between kisses, "—no idea—" Kiss. "—how long—" Kiss. "—I've wanted to do this."

"You have no i-idea, either."

One hand leaves Eret's hip, smoothing up the plane of his torso. Eret gasps into their mouth as they palm at his breast, massaging the flesh through his dress. Her hips jolt against theirs, gods, where *else* could that hand go? The air is hot, heavy. If they're not careful, someone from the feast could find them.

"I would have crowned you Queen of Love and Beauty," Punz murmurs, lips moving back down their neck. Eret tilts their head to give him more space, chest hitching when he gently bites them. "Were it not for your consort, I would have made it known. I would have let *everyone* know." His leg shoves between hers; she can't help but grind against it, holding in a soft moan.

"We need—" Eret pants, clutching him close, "We need to— to get— m-my quarters, we can't—"

Punz pulls away; Eret very nearly whines at the loss.

Swallowing hard, they say, "Lead the way, my lady."

Eret grabs them by the hand once again and drags them through the halls, all the way to his quarters. He throws the door open and shuts it just as hard, locking it immediately. He pulls them towards the royal bedchambers, stopping just across the threshold.

"Would you obey my any order, ser knight?" Eret says. She forces her voice to remain steady, body *burning* for his touch. Punz's breath catches.

"Yes, my lady." He's nearly vibrating in place. "My heart, body, and soul are yours. My honor is your own, my loyalty is to none other."

Eret stands up a little straighter, sticking his chin out.

"Prove it," he challenges. "Prove your loyalty to your king."

Their hands are on her hips before she realizes they've moved. The door slams shut as they tackle her onto the bed, their mouth and body pressed and moving against hers. She begins to work up Punz's tunic. Punz's hands make their way under her skirt. Eret's glasses are tossed aside. Clothing piles on the floor. Death by unfulfilled desire is replaced by a smaller kind of death, one that leaves Eret gasping and demanding more, and Punz is happy to follow the order.

After, the king asks his knight to stay. To not leave before morning. He's been left alone too many times. Please, just until sunrise.

The knight kisses him, soft, ever loyal. Of course he will. He'll stay longer than that, if his king will let him. So long as the king wants him, he will be there. The king nods, a heaviness falling over his eyelids.

The last thing he hears is the knight bidding him a good night, and moments later, he is asleep.

Chapter End Notes

works cited:

lancelot, knight of the cart (de troyes)

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The ninth and final stage of courtly love sees the lovers in endless adventure and subterfuge to evade detection.

In which things come to an end, for now.

Chapter Notes

home stretch.

cw: doomsday, disc finale, manipulative dream, implications that dream is pulling way more strings than anticipated, grief, ghostbur's Whole Deal after doomsday, dream's Whole Deal with the disc finale

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the end of June, Punz can say with full confidence that the last year has been weird.

One year ago, he was the king-consort's right-hand man, best mercenary, and occasional confidant. Now, as he watches the royal couple celebrate their third wedding anniversary, he is the king-regent's right-hand man, personal guard, and secret lover. That last one's a role he never thought he'd have. Then again, he never thought he'd settle down long enough to enjoy another person's company, either, so.

It's a different feeling than they'd had at New Year's, seeing Eret and Dream together. To the untrained eye, the royals are still living in marital bliss, despite the recent political tensions. To Punz, the mutual resentment is obvious. The way Dream puts his arm around Eret like he'd rather be anywhere else. The way Eret rolls their eyes any time Dream says something. Punz isn't jealous, this time. Partially because he knows that everything about the marriage is a massive lie, and partially for the aforementioned 'secret lover' role. It's treated them well. It leads to a lot of rushed encounters and fumbling as to not be caught, but it's treated them well.

Actually, June in general is a weird month for him, attending his lover's anniversary luncheon notwithstanding. It's spent in a back-and-forth limbo state under the eye of both kings, at Eret's side in the courts in the morning, with Dream in the Nether by afternoon, and back with Eret by night. She never asks where they go, thank Prime, but it's still weird.

He's helping Dream gather blackstone one day towards the start of the month when Dream abruptly says, "You know you don't have to keep being their majesty's guard, right?"

"Huh?" Punz pries a chunk of stone out, tossing it into the ender chest set up between them. Dream stops, leaning on his pickaxe.

"You don't have to keep being their guard. They're not doing anything."

Punz raises an eyebrow but gives his own pick another swing.

"I dunno, man, I'd call *being king* something he's doing."

"Yeah, but—" Dream makes a frustrated noise, pushing a hand through his hair. "You know what I mean! They're— he's not *doing* anything anymore that warrants having *you* there to spy on him." He takes up his pick again. "Like, they're not doing the whole disobedient running around behind my back political shit anymore." Punz almost snorts to himself. She is *definitely* running around behind his back. "Y'know, like. He's not sneaking out to help people anymore."

"Dude, she's *king*. I don't think she has *time*." Another chunk of blackstone into the chest. Dream still hasn't told him what it's for, yet. "Like, the court keeps her super busy in the mornings, and the only reason I'm able to do *this* is because she's doing museum stuff all afternoon."

"Punz, come *on*." Dream strikes at the wall extra hard, pulling down a large chunk of stone. He has to break it into smaller pieces before hucking them into the ender chest. "You know what I mean. There's nothing to dethrone him for anymore."

They consider this for a moment. They think about all the action they've seen in the court over the last year, how Eret's handled political problems and how skilled he is at negotiating with delegates. They think about the sheer amount of responsibility he's saddled with and how many times he's complained to them about the stupid shit the less agreeable nobles have demanded. They think, too, about how she's been doing this all while designing, planning, building, curating, and working in a museum. Punz hums, hitting the wall again.

"Who would you replace him with, anyway?"

"I dunno — George? Maybe someone I can pay off?" Dream shakes his head in annoyance.

"Not you? You *are* technically also king."

"Gods, fuck no. You think I have time for that?" He pulls another chunk of rock from the wall, then checks the ender chest. "I think we have enough." Punz deposits the last of the blackstone into the chest. Dream breaks it back down to its portable form and sticks it in his pocket, before nodding back down the path. "C'mon."

Dream leads him back the way they came from, but halfway down the main Nether highway, he turns off the cobblestone path and onto an unmarked netherrack plateau. Neither of them speak as Dream leads him down a series of unmarked tunnels and half-destroyed structures.

They pass through a bastion remnant completely devoid of inhabitants, large swaths visibly carved out of the blackstone at the base. Punz doesn't let himself wonder who could have done this; he just wonders when. On the border of a crimson forest and a soul sand valley, Dream stops.

"There."

He points to a soul sand shelf near the bottom of the cavern; on it, the lava lapping at the cliffs like waves, sits a Nether portal. It looks out of place, but the area is so obviously unused that no one would likely find it regardless. Dream nods towards it and then skids down the hill, tiny soulfires trailing in his wake. Punz follows, much more wary than he was a moment ago. Looking closely, they can see that the soul soil leading up to the portal is packed down, like this path has been walked many times before. Dream wordlessly walks through the portal. Bracing themselves, Punz follows.

The first thing Punz sees on the other side of the portal is darkness. The portal itself casts a dim light around it, but beyond that, there is nothing, just a dark, vast space. He takes a step forward. It echoes off the stone walls. To his left, Dream is holding a torch, fiddling with a panel on the wall. He decisively presses something; with a heavy *click*, the room is suddenly illuminated, dozens of redstone lamps lining the walls and set into the floor.

The room is massive: even with the lights on, Punz can't see the ceiling. The space in front of the portal stretches a good twenty meters back, ending in a towering elevator shaft lined in lamps that fades into nothing the higher he looks. To the right, a tunnel branches off from the main hall; from here, Punz can't see what's down it. On either side of the portal, marquee-like lights frame an empty space, and below them sit empty pedestals made of pure gold. The walls are rough-hewn and half-completed and the whole place smells like void. The floor, he realizes, is partially made of bedrock. Wherever they are, they are impossibly deep underground.

"What the hell..." he says, walking forward, "You did all this?"

"Nah." Dream has already set up his ender chest and is reaching in all the way up to his shoulder. "Ranboo helped. He likes having tasks." He hefts a big chunk of rock out of the chest, nodding at Punz. "C'mere, help me get all this out. Raw rock over here, bricks over there."

Punz stiltedly walks over, unable to process what they're seeing. They help sort the rock and bricks into piles absently, almost disconnected from their own hands. What the hell? What are they doing? What the hell is this?

"What's..." he says slowly, looking around, "What's this all for, then?"

"Secret project." Dream shrugs. He grabs a couple bricks and starts filling in the wall. "Been planning something big. It needs the proper presentation, y'know?"

"...Sure."

Dream scoffs, coming back over.

“Just don’t tell anyone. It’s a surprise.”

Head still spinning, Punz nods. When asked, he hands Dream another brick.

When he’s not helping Dream build his evil lair or whatever, Punz finds himself in the other strange scenario of the month: sneaking around behind Dream’s back to hook up with his spouse.

For the most part, it is business as usual. He serves as Eret’s guard, stays nearby, helps her read documents that have godawful handwriting, and gets to listen to her infodump about mapmaking. It just so happens that he also gets to sleep in their bed, hold them in his arms overnight, see their bedhead in the mornings, watch them scowl into their coffee at breakfast, and catch them in quick kisses when heading to non-urgent appointments. It means being able to see them at their most unguarded and teasing them for the faces they make when they eat something too spicy. It means now seeing them in the throes of pleasure along with all the other emotions he’s borne witness too, and feeling immense pride at the knowledge that he’s the cause of it.

Sure, they cannot be as physically affectionate as either of them would like during walks or public meals, but Punz has dealt with being unable to hold Eret’s hand for the last year. He’s able to deal with it a little more easily now that he knows she wants to hold his just as much. They’re still able to sit together in the walled garden and in Eret’s quarters or study without interruption. He’s still able to kiss him in the privacy of a spiral stairwell when nobody is around. He’s still able to call them *my liege* when he wants to say *my love* and have them know exactly what he means.

There’s a weird feeling in Punz’s gut, though, that this peace won’t last forever. It’s been quiet for too long, ever since Tommy died. Something’s going to go very wrong very soon. They enjoy relaxing with Eret while they can.

In the middle of the month, the president and minutes man of L’Manberg are briefly held hostage by anarchists. After they’re let go, witnesses claim one of the kidnappers was the late Tommy Innit himself. A few days later, a flier for a festival in L’Manberg lands on Eret’s desk. A few days after *that*, Dream shows Punz the finished vault and reveals exactly how many items he’s stolen as leverage from the nobility and major political players in the area. He notices how Dream tries to hide the spot clearly meant for something of Punz’s from view and silently thanks Prime that Dream doesn’t know him very well anymore. The person he holds dearest is far, far away right now, and if he had to, he’d kill Dream to get them out of here. He’s their guard, their knight. It would break everything he stands for if he’d put Eret in danger. Dream pays him handsomely for his silence. If something big is about to happen here, money won’t be enough to keep him quiet. The royals celebrate their third wedding anniversary towards the end of the month, the feeling of coming dread gets worse, and summer continues to roll along.

Five days into July, L’Manberg holds its second festival.

Punz doesn’t want to think about it.

It had been fun. And then the other shoe dropped. Dream only gives them a day to get out. It isn't enough.

("Eret, are you—" Punz catches their wrist as they start to leave.

"I—" She pulls away, not looking at him. "Not— Not now. I can't, right now."

"But—"

"I have a lot to do. And a lot to prepare for." It sounds like he's trying not to cry. "Please, Punz. Go help the evacuation teams. I'll see you tomorrow.")

He spends all night getting people out of L'Manberg and all morning doing the same. If he gets more than three hours of sleep, it'll be a fucking miracle. In the last hours leading up to the battle, he does his best to get himself ready. Potions, golden apples, ender pearls, emergency supplies. Dream had promised to bring the place down to bedrock. Punz feels a little weird packing earplugs and a face mask, such commonplace items being used in such a serious event, but it feels necessary. Health pots can only do so much for dust inhalation and hearing loss.

(It's 1:30 in the morning. The docks of L'Manberg are empty, though there is activity in the buildings. The next wave are packing their things. From where he waits at city center, Punz can see a light on in Ranboo's house. The kid is pacing and flipping through a notebook in the living room, purple particles radiating off him in waves. He wonders how much the kid knows about the room he'd supposedly helped Dream carve out. He wonders if he was the one to burn down the Community House.

All the water has been drained from the piers. Technoblade's wanted posters are still up. Silhouetted against the moon, Punz can see an obsidian lattice taking shape as if by magic, suspended midair through the same. The bombs will be falling from there, then. Great.

An ender pearl thrown from above shatters on the dock beside Punz. A second later, Dream appears.

"You're sticking with them, then?" Both of them are looking at Ranboo's house. The kid is still pacing, gesturing wildly as though talking to himself. Punz feels bad for him.

"You've gone too far, man. This is too far."

"It has to be done. You know that."

"I don't." He sighs. In the window, Ranboo sits down heavily at the table, head in hands. A cat jumps up beside him to nuzzle his arm, and he immediately buries his face in its fur.

"What did you do to him?"

Dream snorts, shoving his hand in his pockets and rocking back on his heels. "Nothing. He asked me what I needed and I told him. Like I said, he loves having tasks. Not my fault he doesn't remember."

Punz glances at him out of the corner of their eye. Even with his face covered, he looks far too satisfied.

“...You need to go,” they say quietly, slowly resting a hand on the pommel of their sword, “before I kill you.”

“That won’t stop the bombs. Or the Withers Techno’s bringing.” Techno’s bringing Withers. Oh, Prime. “But I can tell when I’m not wanted. Payment’s on the table if you change your mind.”

Dream whistles, high and sharp, and in a shower of purple particles, vanishes. The next wave of evacuees leaves in fifteen minutes.)

People insist on staying and fighting. Others decide they’re going to shelter underground. Others still decide to stay without fighting, to give up. Punz tries to get everyone who isn’t stupid enough for any of those options to safety.

The resistance is set up in one of Eret’s forts. They aren’t able to pull much together, not overnight. When Punz returns at dawn, he finds a small crater where the supplies should be. Sabotage, then. From who, he doesn’t know, but that doesn’t really matter. His comm buzzes.

<The_Eret> I’m not fighting.

<Punz> good.

<Punz> be safe

<The_Eret> I can’t promise that.

<The_Eret> I’ll be nearby.

<The_Eret> But I won’t be fighting.

She doesn’t respond to any of his messages after that.

The bombs start falling at three o’clock exactly, and they do not stop for five days.

Two days after the bombs stop falling, Eret finds himself wandering along the Prime Path on the outskirts of L’Manberg.

The rain has cleared the smoke enough for crews to start going in tomorrow. The stone is too slick to do it today. They’ll try to look for bodies, for survivors, for anything they can salvage. Eret doesn’t think they’re going to find much. The air still smells like petrichor, gunpowder, and death. Mostly petrichor, this far out, but the breeze will occasionally bring the rot with it. He tries to not breathe too deeply.

It’s a nice day, for what it’s worth. The sky is clear. The sun is shining. The rain has soothed the worst of the July humidity for today, leaving it warm but not soupy. It’s the first moment Eret’s had to herself since Doomsday started, what with figuring out where to house the refugees, where to treat the sick and injured, how to feed them all. There were nobles in her court the *moment* the resistance gave up. None of them want to deal with all the new people. Make the king do it.

Their ears are still ringing. It's been a week.

As he walks, though, Eret's surprised to find that he's not alone. Further down, he spots two people; one walking, hands in his pockets, the other semi-translucent, balancing on the edge and hopping over puddles. Their voices carry as they talk.

One voice, solemn but still friendly. "You wanna know what my reaction was when you died? When Wilbur died?"

A second, echoing and curious. "What was your reaction?" The two figures stop; Eret walks closer. After a moment: "Aww, so you *liked* Alivebur."

"Well, not—" Quackity says, shrugging. He looks awkward, even from here. "Not towards the end, but— but at the start—"

"But you had a good time together," Ghostbur interrupts, "You want to bring him back to life, please kill me."

"That's— woah, that's— a— a lot of pressure, a lot of pressure on me, uh—" Quackity takes a step away, rubbing the back of his neck and turning away. He sees Eret. Eret sees him. "Hey, Ghostbur—"

When Ghostbur turns around, his face lights up.

"Oh! Eret! Hello, Eret!" He beckons them over, then nudges Quackity. "Big Q, say hi to Eret."

Quackity grimaces. "...Hi, Eret."

"...Hi." She stops in front of them. Quackity sports a bandage on his forehead and heavy bags under his eyes, but looks otherwise unharmed. Ghostbur is, as always, translucent and marginally floating, unbothered by the things around him. He leans in close, slinging an arm over Eret's shoulder and stage-whispering as though sharing a secret.

"Eret, apparently you're a bad man. According to the song."

"Really?" Her heart sinks. It does that a lot, when Ghostbur remembers things. "There's a— oh, yes, the..."

"Yeah! Apparently, you're the bad guy!"

"I—" They fidget, glancing in the direction of the crater before looking at the ground. "You— You know, I've— tried to change things, but, uh—"

"I like Eret," Ghostbur declares, looking at Quackity. When she looks up, Quackity doesn't look impressed.

"...You can have your own opinions," he says. He's back in his casual clothes. No more suits, no more ties. Just a sweatshirt and a pair of track pants. Ghostbur offers her some blue. She takes it, just in time to hear Quackity say, more to himself than anyone else, "I don't like

Eret.” The once-clear substance turns indigo in her hands almost immediately. Ghostbur offers her some more. She takes it.

“Hey, Eret,” Ghostbur starts, slipping his arm around theirs and tugging them along. He sounds cheery as ever. “Can you help kill me? I want to die!” The blue in their hands again darkens. Ghostbur offers her more.

“Eret, Eret, please, don’t—” Quackity jogs to catch up, pulling the ghost away. When they meet his eye this time, he almost looks sorry. “He’s been going around— He doesn’t—” He grimaces again. “He doesn’t want to be a ghost anymore.”

“Which, for me, is basically death!”

They explain to her the basics of it, of Ghostbur’s desire to be human again, that maybe everyone will like Alivebur again, one more apologetic, the other enthusiastic. They tell her about his unfinished business and that since L’Manberg is gone, he doesn’t have that unfinished business anymore. The issue, though, is *how*.

“That’s the thing,” Quackity says, giving Ghostbur the apologetic look now, “Like— Wilbur, like I said, it’s a complicated process and we need to talk to—”

“*Ohhh*, yeah.” Ghostbur turns to Eret, very serious. “Eret, we’d have to talk to Dream, because—”

Quackity cuts him off, turning to them. “But Eret would have no issue with that, ‘cause he’s, like, in *love* with Dream or something, huh, Eret?” This isn’t where she thought this would go. She takes a step back. Quackity takes a step closer, leaning forward. “Remember when I blew up— when I blew up the castle, and *he* came to your rescue?” Quackity planned that? He’d been part of the group to plan that? With every word, he gets closer and closer, sneering at her. “Oh, you must have *loved* that, Eret.”

“You know that’s not true,” Eret says. Quackity’s dark eyes stare into his, keeping him pinned in place.

“Do I?” He’d wanted to run away with her, she remembers. Before the war. She was back in the castle the night it ended. He had two engagement rings two months later. Her heart pounds in her chest. Quackity rolls his eyes, pulling away. “Anyway, Dream might be able to resurrect him, so.”

“...Can he?”

“He might!” Ghostbur chirps, “You hear a *lot* of rumors when you’re dead. He *might* be able to!” He grins. Eret would rather be anywhere else. As interesting as the idea that his damned husband can raise the dead is, he’s rather be anywhere fucking else. “He seems pretty powerful, is he not?”

“He’s...” Eret shrugs, looking again at the path. There’s a loose plank in the ground. Someone should do something about that. “He’s the one that made me king, so...” Quackity *hmph* s, self-satisfied. The week’s been long enough. She doesn’t have the energy to fight

him. She barely has the energy to promise to Ghostbur that if Dream can't bring him back to life, then she'll find a way. She turns down more blue when he offers and excuses herself shortly after.

It's the high emotions of Doomsday talking, he tells himself as he hurries back to the castle. Quackity is still feeling the high emotions of Doomsday. Everything he's worked for over the last few years is gone. Everything he's sacrificed, everything he's gone through hasn't been worth it. Every plan he's made has fallen through. Eret shouldn't blame him for lashing out. It's Eret's own husband who caused all of this. The king's consort is an extension of the king, after all.

Doesn't mean she wanted this. Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.

They never could have had their fairy tale ending, anyway. It never would have worked. Criseyde will always betray Troilus, in one way or another.

Tommy's house is burnt down partway through August. Witnesses say they spotted a figure in bright green leaving the scene. Things are coming to a head and it's all Punz can do to keep Eret's on their shoulders. It's never easy when the king-consort is the one committing arson. There had been enough clamor for Dream's denouncement after Doomsday.

Tommy and Tubbo are going to set out in the morning. They're getting everything together tonight. They're getting Tommy's records back. Punz has never been a praying man, but they find themselves in the Holy Land that night asking Prime to fucking keep them safe. To send them strength, to send Punz a sign. They remember the vault they'd helped Dream build. They remember the twin pedestals on either side of the Nether portal. They remember the spots marked with people's names, for valuable possessions so that he could have leverage. *It's a surprise*, Dream had said. It would be something big. They'd been paid to keep his mouth shut. They're not sure they can do that anymore.

When he gets home, there is a note in his mailbox.

under the bridge round the side. consider it. Please. -T.I.

Under the bridge in his back garden, Punz finds a small chest. The contents – gold, jewels, and three bars of Netherite – were clearly cobbled together on short notice. Tommy's never had much to his name, even before his exile; this is, quite likely, everything he has.

He shouldn't even take the cash. If Tommy comes back, he's going to need it.

This must be the sign. It has to be.

Tommy *will* come back. Punz is going to make sure of it.

There is something sickeningly satisfying about how easily Tommy cuts Dream down not once, but twice. Eret's pictured her husband's death many, many times, but this is much better than she'd imagined. The axe sinks into his chest like butter. His mask lies shattered on the

floor. She gets a twisted fucking pleasure out of seeing him beg for mercy, beg for his life, unmasked and face drawn up in fear. The only thing that stops Tommy from making it stick is Dream's promise of resurrection. He can bring Wilbur back, he pleads.

("How did you know where this was?")

"He told me. Didn't think I'd give him up."

"I'm glad you did."

"Prime. Fuck. So am I.")

At Dream's trial, Eret thinks it may have actually been better if Tommy had just killed him. It would leave them a widow. They could figure out necromancy themselves. They could remarry. It doesn't matter, though. Dream is sentenced to life in prison, maximum security, no hope for parole. He's too dangerous to be let out again, and the SMP does not have a death penalty. Life in Pandora it is. Eret's testimony helps put him away. It would have been better if Tommy had just killed him.

("What is your relationship to the defendant?")

"We are married."

"Will this affect your testimony?")

"No." She swallows hard and ignores Dream's smug expression. "We've been separated for months.")

A week after Dream's sentencing, the court is still a mess. Never mind the ecological disasters, never mind the famines, never mind the housing crisis – the *king-consort* is in prison for the rest of his life and the kingdom is in a fucking tizzy about it. Some people demand Eret divorce him. Some people demand she won't be king if she does. Some people call her a traitorous, lying bitch for testifying against him and are promptly dragged out of the court for taking that tone with the king. No decision will be made today. The court is dismissed early.

It's still on Eret's mind as they try to sign off on the next batch of aid for Doomsday survivors. It's on their mind as they try to do damn near *anything*. They sit in their study and think about it for *hours*. Gods. Gods, what are they going to do? When Punz comes in, the moon is high in the sky and Eret is still, fruitlessly, thinking.

"My lady," they greet, closing the door behind them. They're carrying a saucer with a teacup on it. Chamomile, by the smell. They lean down and place it on the desk before them, kissing the top of their head. Eret takes a deep breath, letting the steam waft into their senses. "It's late."

Eret sighs, nodding. "I know. I know. I just..."

Punz takes a seat in his armchair beside them – it's been there for a while and has been his for longer, officially or unofficially. Eret leans into him, sighing again. She gestures vaguely at

the papers before her. “All of this is so...”

He closes his eyes as Punz glances over the desk. Treaty, trade deal, annulment, request for aid, missive, divorce law, environmental protections. Punz has been out all day. It’s been a nightmare trying to read it all. A hand comes up and rubs his stiff shoulder until he relaxes.

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know.” She shakes her head, opening her eyes. “I don’t know if I should.”

“Might make things easier.” For the two of them? Certainly. No one has cottoned on to the possibility that the king has been having an affair with his most trusted knight. Their loyalty is of their position, the picture of chivalry, of *domnei*. Nothing physical, nothing romantic, solely the devotion of a knight to their king and a king to their knight. Were the divorce to go through, this perception could end. They could marry. They could do whatever they wanted. It’s not like Dream’s there to burn up the marriage certificate anymore.

“But it might make things infinitely worse,” they counter, “You know there are still loyalists questioning my legitimacy. I– I’m not the *founder*, I’m some... some foreign seductress who slept his way to the throne.” They laugh, head in their hands. “They’d rather have the man with twenty-odd war crimes under his belt rule than I.”

Punz snorts mirthlessly, squeezing his shoulder.

“So I’ve heard.” He pauses, sighing himself. “You don’t have to decide right now.”

“I’ll sleep on it. We can...” Eret shrugs, leaning into him further. “...put it on ice.” He kisses their hair again. None of her other partners have been this affectionate, from what she can recall. Not in this kind of way. Her husband certainly wasn’t. And if she divorces him, he never has to be. Wouldn’t that be ideal. Another thought occurs to them. “...The paperwork is going to be monumental, if I do.”

“Will it?” Punz asks, amused.

“The last time a king tried to get a divorce without precedent, he separated an entire church over it. It was a mess.”

“And when was that?”

Eret has to think. It’s been a while. Nowhere close to the SMP or any of its surrounding kingdoms.

“...Over half a millennium ago? Give or take? Both sects died out after Prime got big.” She frowns. “Perhaps not the best frame of reference.”

“No, not really.”

And, really, the idea that there’s no precedent is a little ridiculous. Maybe she’s just catastrophizing. Maybe there won’t be any problem with him divorcing Dream. He’s in prison for a good fucking reason. It’s not like she’ll have to make something up to get

someone to believe him. Hell, he's the *king*. The fuck would they have to even *say* against it if *he's* the one making the laws. Gods, this is stupid. This is fucking stupid.

"I don't—" She's getting frustrated. "I don't have to. To do anything. About it. Not yet." Punz hums beside her. "The— the sentencing was barely a— a week ago, anyway. It's— gods, it's too early to even—"

"It's too *late* to be stressing out about this, highness," Punz interrupts. That makes Eret finally stop. Shit. Yeah. It is late. Punz's fingers comb through her hair gently, separating a few curls. "You still have a mortal body. You need sleep. Can't think very well when you're tired, can you?"

She takes a deep breath, nodding again.

"Right. Right." Another sigh. Another kiss to her forehead. She doesn't know what she'd do without him. Nature does not demand the formel choose a tercel immediately. She gives her another year. "I'll... discuss options with my advisors later."

"Exactly." Punz lets him go, standing. He offers him a hand. "May I tempt you to bed, my lady?"

Eret laughs despite herself, taking it.

"You may, ser knight."

They'll sleep on it. They don't have to make a decision now. Dream's only been out of the picture in a formal sense for a few days. No one's expecting them to have all the answers right now. There are still loose ends to tie up. Adventures to have. There is still a ghost she needs to help bring back to life. There are still red vines to clean up. With Dream locked away, maybe her life can actually *begin*. Only took twenty-seven damn years.

As she settles into bed beside Punz, Eret reminds herself for the umpteenth that she doesn't need to make up her mind just yet. She's got plenty else to worry about. A divorce wouldn't help any of it.

The king kisses his knight softly. The knight wraps their arms around their king. They'll need to continue their routine of avoiding detection come morning. For now, though, it doesn't matter.

When Eret sleeps, they dream of fairy tale romance.

Chapter End Notes

works cited:
troilus and criseyde (chaucer)

henry VIII (...history??)

parliament of fowles (chaucer)

and that's a wrap! hope you enjoyed watching me play with my barbies and makign them act out my special interest of medieval and early modern literature. you know the drill. kudos comment etc. ok i love you take care of yourselves im gonna go throw rocks at something. <3 bye.

End Notes

art in chapter 3 done by my beloved [pinkminecraft](#), beta read my ALSO beloved [medusa](#).
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